# The BOYNTON PLUCK

HELEN WARD BANKS

Presented to

Robert Harshman

for perfect attendance

1932-33.

Edith Kauffman.

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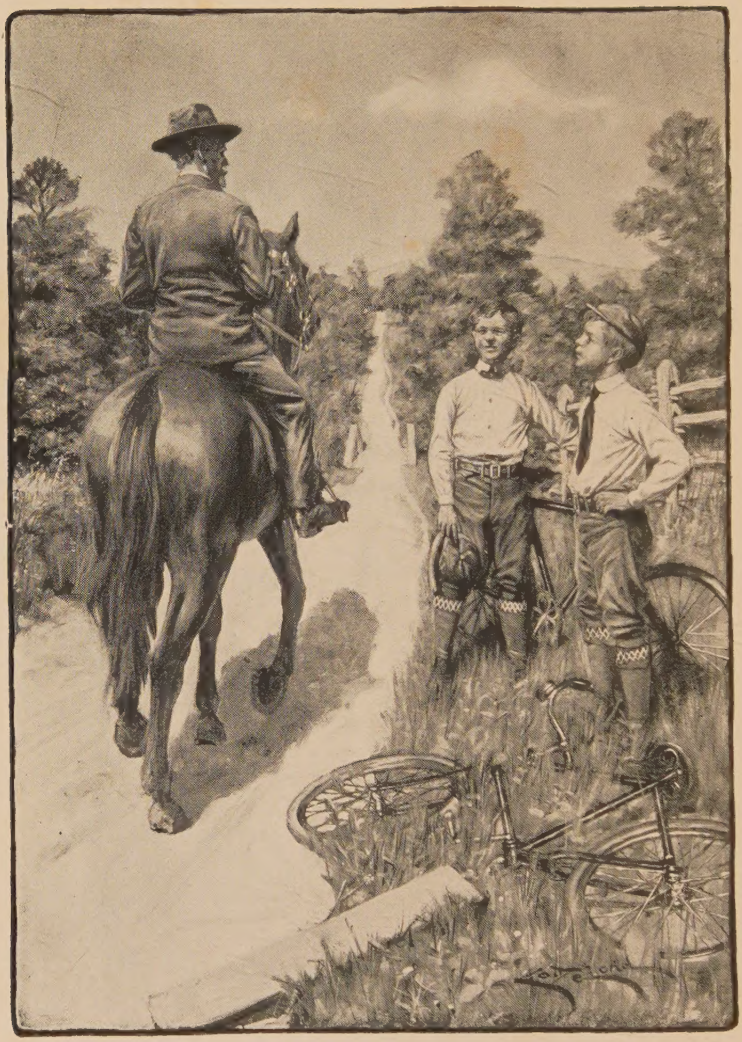

"In trouble?" the gentleman asked

# The Boynton Pluck

By

Helen Ward Banks

Illustrated by Clyde O. Deland

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Manufacturing
Plant
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*To*
*Henry Ward Banks*
*First, Second and Third*
*My Father, My Brother and My Nephew*
*This Little Book*
*is Lovingly Inscribed*

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# THE BOYNTON PLUCK

## CHAPTER I

### BILLY GETS INTO TROUBLE

"THAT will do, Boynton," Mr. Williams said coldly. "I am tired of hearing you mispronounce those Hebrew names. Next time choose something you know more about. I am sorry to tell you that you will get a zero for every lesson which you have tried to recite to-day."

Billy Boynton turned very red. He had been so absorbed in the poem he was reciting that the sudden stop made him feel as if some one had struck him. Billy would not learn his Latin conjugations; he could see no sense in figures; but he loved poetry, and the swing of his verse had filled his soul with delight.

There was nothing now for him to do but to march down from the platform and take his seat at his own desk. He would not look at Bob as he passed, for he knew his brother's eyes would be full of reproach.

He sat erect and motionless, while the biggest boy in school asked his fellows—without getting an answer—"Who was Blennerhasset?" and little Johnnie Green almost wrecked himself in the "Wreck of the Hesperus." Then school was dismissed.

Outside the door, Billy was surrounded by a sympathizing group of friends. But his jovial face was set and gloomy and no condolences could bring back his smiles.

"Old Williams is a cad!" he said wrathfully, picking up a stone from the road as if he were anxious to fling it at Mr. Williams's head. "I'll pay him out; see if I don't."

Bob gave his brother a little pinch. "Look out," he said in a savage undertone.

Mr. Williams was standing on the outside of the circle.

"Good-afternoon," he said with marked politeness, and walked away.

"Whew!" whistled Billy. "Do you suppose he heard me?"

"Of course he heard you," Bob answered, "and now he'll be after you worse than ever. I'm glad school is most over. You never will learn any sense, Billy."

"That's because they stuff my head with nonsense: what am I ever going to get by learning Latin? It only takes the time when I might be doing something worth while. Come on, fellows, don't let's waste the whole afternoon. 'Come one, come all; this rock shall fly from its firm base, and so shall I'—get it before any of you," and flinging his stone straight as a dart down the road Billy was after it with all the boys pell-mell at his heels.

Bob was able to beat them all at running, and he fell on the stone while the others tumbled on top of him, a waving mass of arms and legs. By the time they were disentangled, Billy had forgotten he had a grievance.

The boys drifted apart on their various ways until Bob and Billy were left alone. At the corner of a lane, Billy also stopped.

"Got to leave you, Bobs. I'm going to stop around at Sandy's. The cow was sort of queer last night and he thinks I'm a cow judge. I told him I'd come around after school."

"I don't see why you always go with that kind of boys," said Bob.

"He's a first-rate kind," said Billy, stoutly. "It's not his fault that he has to work for old Williams. He

doesn't cheat and he doesn't swear and you can't say that of all the fellows that go to school that you think are swells. And he's more fun, for he knows such a lot of stuff about birds and things."

"I'm sure father would rather you should go with gentlemen than plowboys."

"'You are old, Father William, the young man said,'" quoted Billy, derisively. "Don't try your grand-daddy airs on me. Sandy's a long sight more of a gentleman than Smith or Perkins, and he hasn't any friend but me, and he gets an awful lot of knocking around. I'm going to ask father if he wants me to give him up."

It annoyed Bob that he could not influence Billy on this point, for he was so used to leading his brother in everything.

"Very well," he answered shortly. "I am going home, and if you know what's good for you, you'll come too."

"Nay, nay," answered Billy, turning down the lane.

He avoided Mr. Williams's house by as long a circuit as possible, and came out at last behind the little barn. Sandy was not there, nor did he respond to Billy's cautious whistle, so the boy went on to their

second rendezvous—the orchard. The meetings were always "under four eyes," for Mr. Williams approved of the friendship no more than did Bob.

Under a big apple-tree Billy came suddenly upon Sandy, lying with his face hidden in his arms; he was sobbing as if his last joy on earth had left him.

"Hello!" said Billy with a boy's awkward lack of knowledge what to do with tears. "What's up, Sandy?"

Sandy lifted his head, and showed a gentle, little freckled face with pale blue eyes, swollen now and red with weeping.

"Oh, Billy, she's dead," he gasped.

"Who?" asked Billy in alarmed bewilderment.

"Daisy. And she was such a nice cow. She loved me, and I loved her. I didn't know she was so sick, and I didn't get the cow doctor, and Mr. Williams'll be awful mad; he'll lick the life outen me; he was awful fond of her; and I was awful fond of her too. Oh, Billy, I wish she hadn't died."

"Great Scott," was all Billy could find to say. Sandy did not find the remark very consoling and went back to his crying.

Billy sat down on the grass beside his little friend, much more soberly than was his wont. He could not

see much comfort wherever he might look; Sandy was in a tight place, and Billy saw no hope of getting him out of it. Daisy had been the one thing in the world that Mr. Williams cared for. He had no wife nor children; he feared dogs and detested cats; he considered boys his natural enemies. On this one cow the stern old man had lavished all his human affection. He and Sandy had tended her between them, for beside being a pet she was a valuable animal, and was daintily housed and fed. Mr. Williams's wrath was sure to be hot and heavy.

"Didn't he know she was sick?" Billy asked.

"No," sobbed Sandy. "I didn't think she was much sick yesterday and he was busy and didn't go to see her. And he was so mad at me yesterday I dasent tell him she didn't eat her supper good. I forgot to go for the corn for the chickens, and he was terrible cross about it. And it's all my fault. He told me to pasture her in the orchard, and she'd eaten most all the grass outen here so I just put her down in the corner lot, and he didn't know and last night he told me there was stuff down there that was poison to cows, and he was so cross I dasent tell him she'd been there. I run over and asked Tom Grimes what to do, and he told me and I done it, and he said he guessed

she'd be all right. But I'd ought to have got the cow doctor. I went off to the village for the chicken corn, and when I come back she was awful sick, and now she's dead."

Sandy told his story with many sobs and breaks, and Billy listened sympathetically. But he could see no hope. He leaned over and gave Sandy an awkward pat on the back.

"Cheer up, old chap. It isn't as bad as if it was twice as bad. You've got me yet for a friend, anyway. Brace up, and let's see what we can do about it."

"He'll be so awful mad," said Sandy, drawing his jacket sleeve across his eyes. "Oh, I wish I hadn't a done it."

"Have you got any money?" asked Billy brightening.

Sandy shook his head.

"Neither have I," said Billy growing gloomy again. "Not a red: I never do have. I thought maybe if we could pay for the cow, he mightn't be so mad."

"I shouldn't wonder if she cost more than fifty dollars," Sandy said despondently, "and where could I ever get that much money?"

"We might earn it."

"I don't earn anything. I only get my clothes and keep, and Mr. Williams says I ain't worth that."

"Why don't you run away?"

Sandy's gentle eyes opened wide.

"Where'd I run to?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Billy, laughing a little in spite of himself, "but there must be places where you wouldn't get kicked about the way you do here; I'm going to ask father about it."

"Did you ever get a licking?" asked Sandy.

"No," Billy said. Sandy sighed.

"We'll earn the money some way sure," said Billy briskly. "When you tell old Williams about the cow you tell him that you and I are going to pay for it: mother always finds some way out of a scrape. You just stand up to him, and I guess he'll let you down kind of easy. I wish I was Bobby, and I'd stay and tell him, but I'd only get you in a deeper hole if he saw me here. He's downer than down on me to-day. It's time for him to be home too, so I'm going to cut out of this. Brace up, that's a good chap. I'll see you again to-morrow after I've spoken to father."

Billy jumped the fence and was off across the fatal corner lot. But he was not quick enough to escape Mr. Williams's vigilant eye. The master made

straight for the orchard and there he found the trembling Sandy.

"Who was that who just went across the field?" he asked sternly.

"Billy Boynton, sir.

"And you have been wasting your afternoon with an idle fellow with whom you know I do not wish you to associate? What is the matter with you? What have you been crying about?"

The tears came again into Sandy's eyes, but he grasped his courage in both hands, and told his story; it was even more disconnected than when he had told it to Billy. The boy lost his thread so often that the only real point Mr. Williams grasped was that his cow was dead: poison and Billy Boynton and offers of money were unintelligibly mixed up with it. He turned white with passion.

"Go into the house," he said, his voice trembling. "Go into the house and keep out of my sight. I wouldn't trust myself to lay hands on you, you careless, ungrateful good-for-nothing. That comes of associating with such boys. Let him never set foot on my place again. He is the leading spirit in this business. I can understand it all: he comes out of school threatening vengeance for a deserved punishment, and

then I find him sneaking off my place leaving my cow dead behind him. Does he think now to hush the matter up with an offer of money? His father shall hear the whole story, and you shall both suffer for it —both of you. Now get into the house."

## CHAPTER II

### AND FALLS IN DEEPER

BILLY'S hair was neat and his hands clean for dinner that night; he would not spoil his cause by making his father displeased with him. When dinner was over he followed Mr. Boynton into his den, and told him the whole story of the day in a straightforward fashion, to which his father gave close attention. When it was ended, Mr. Boynton asked a few short, lawyer-like questions which brought out all that Billy knew about Sandy, and then said quizzically,

"And what can you do to earn money?"

"I don't know, father. But I'm pretty big and pretty strong, and I thought maybe you'd know something. I'd like to help Sandy out."

"Yes. If we make friends we are surely bound to help them out of trouble when we can, in whatever way we can. But you have not had experience enough yet to make me sure you can always choose your friends wisely. I must look a little deeper into the matter, and find out what sort of a fellow this Sandy is before we go any further. Give me a day or

two, for I am very busy just now, and then we will discuss it again."

"All right," said Billy, confident in his father's justice. "You'll find Sandy's a good sort of a chap. But you mustn't ask old Williams about him, for he doesn't like him."

"Ask whom?" said Mr. Boynton with the direct gaze that was so disconcerting.

"I mean Mr. Williams," Billy said, blushing a bit.

"Ah. I had an idea that my sons had some notion of respect for older people. No, I shall not ask any prejudiced witnesses. Go on now to your lessons. If you don't do better at school I'll take you away, and hire you out to tend cows."

"I wish you would," Billy answered with a look of interest in his honest blue eyes.

Mr. Boynton laughed and shook his head.

"You and Bob both have a great deal to learn if you are going to make your mother and me proud of you some day. Do you believe that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then go and take the top book from your pile and learn the lesson in it without a mistake."

"Yes, father," Billy said again. He attacked his geography with vigor: translated his Cæsar into re-

markable English, and even wrestled with some examples in arithmetic. But they were more than a match for him, and his new impulse toward learning was exhausted before he went to bed.

When he went into his Latin class the next morning, his translation was not called for. Billy passed the hour happily in drawing dragons on the margin of his book. When geography was called, Billy sat straight with interest: for once he knew his lesson. But Mr. Williams asked him no question, and Billy began to see he was being purposely ignored. He had always had a kindly toleration for his teacher, but these last days were bringing them rapidly into open conflict. By the time arithmetic was over, Billy was reckless and ready for anything.

"What's the row to-day between you and Williams?" asked Bob as the boys tumbled out at recess.

"'Rowley, powley, gammon and spinach,' I guess," said Billy. "That's all it is—gammon."

"You'll get in hot water yet if you don't look out."

"'Then they'll up with my heels and smother my squeals in a pot of the boiling—water.' Who's got the ball?"

But Billy was not fated to finish the game. Little Burns, with an open mouth of apprehension, came

running to summon Billy Boynton to Mr. Williams. Billy tossed the ball to Bob, picked up his cap, and, with a leisurely whistle, sauntered toward the house.

He found Mr. Williams pacing restlessly up and down one of the little rooms; the master turned abruptly as the boy entered.

"Shut the door," he said sharply, "and then perhaps you will tell me of what my cow died."

It was hard for Billy to resist a joke, though it did not usually carry him into impertinence. Just now, however, Mr. Williams irritated him, and he was not in a mood to consider. Instead of answering he softly whistled a little tune.

"You are impertinent, sir," Mr. Williams thundered. "There is a limit even to my patience. My cow died very suddenly through eating something of a poisonous nature. I think you may be able to tell me something about it."

Billy shook his head, in slow surprise. "I don't know, sir. She probably found some plant in the pasture that made her sick, didn't she?"

The master's hands were clasped tight behind his back and his eyes were frowning fiercely from under his thick brows.

"I see you are determined to carry the thing

through," he said. "I will not even attempt to speak with you further, but shall lay the matter before your father. I hope he will convince you of the downward road you are treading when you follow threats of revenge with the killing of my cow, and then seek to atone for your crime by an offer of money. You may go now, but you may come to me after school to apologize for your present impertinence. I shall take the matter to your father."

But Billy had caught only one sentence in the speech. He was looking at Mr. Williams with wide eyes of astonishment.

"Me kill your cow?" he exclaimed. "What would I do that for?"

"Me can never be the subject of a verb," corrected Mr. Williams impatiently. "Why you should do it, your own heart can best tell you. I know only the facts:—you left school threatening to be revenged upon me: I went home to find my cow poisoned and you sneaking off my place, while my hired boy offers me money in your name to hush the matter up. Those are plain facts, and any attempt to deny them will only add falsehood to crime. I hope your father will deal with you as you deserve."

"My father will believe that I didn't kill your cow,

for I will tell him so, and he knows I tell the truth," said Billy stoutly.

"You may go," said the master coldly, and Billy turned away to seek Bob; that faithful brother who always said first, "I told you so," and then pulled him out of his scrape.

Bob listened now with kindling eyes.

"What rubbish!" he said. "He can't really think you killed his cow. Didn't you tell him you didn't?"

"Of course," said Billy cheerfully. "I told him so politely and he told me I didn't tell the truth."

Bob flushed.

"I'll go and tell him pretty quick he doesn't know you."

"Better not stick your fingers in this pie, Bobby. You'll only burn 'em, for it's a good red-hot one. He thinks you're a little cherub, but he won't listen to even you to-day; he's too mad to have a bit of reason in him as big as a pin head. Let him tell father what he likes."

Bob's faith in his own ability seldom failed him.

"He'll listen to me," he said confidently. "I've got to make him know it's all nonsense. It would be a disgrace to have him even tell father such a thing."

But Bob's errand was fruitless, except that it called

down upon Billy's head greater woe than would have otherwise fallen upon it, and was, in fact, the first cause of all that followed.

Mr. Williams had no ears for anything Bob might say. "He need not send you to beg him off. I am not to be moved from my purpose. I shall tell your father all the facts and leave him to punish him as he sees fit."

"But he won't punish him," Bob blurted out, "he hasn't done anything to be punished for."

Mr. Williams stopped in his walk and stood looking at Bob fixedly. Then he opened the door into the larger room. "If your parents are so blind to the frightful downward path upon which your brother has started, then the duty of discipline devolves upon me. Take your seat, Boynton: I am about to ring the bell."

Bob took his seat, feeling thoroughly downcast. He had done Billy no good, he knew, and he could not see what was to be the outcome of the affair.

As for poor Mr. Williams, he was scarcely responsible for his temper. He had spent a sleepless night, grieving for his cow, and had brooded over his wrongs until they were magnified out of all proportion. Added to this, was Bob's assertion that the boy who,

he believed, had cost him all his sorrow, was to go unpunished. Such boys as did not know their lessons that afternoon had a bad time of it.

At last school was dismissed. Billy waited after the others, obediently to apologize for the rudeness of his whistling. But he found no opportunity for his remarks. Mr. Williams had only one idea in his mind :— to make him confess his guilt. That Billy could not do. The interview was long and stormy. Before it was over all the curious boys, excepting Bob, had drifted away to their homes, and Billy was left to walk home alone with his brother; his cheeks were flushed, and in his eyes was a mixture of anger and amused surprise.

"What happened?" Bob asked anxiously, falling into step.

Billy looked at him with that odd expression still on his face.

"He licked me," he said simply.

## CHAPTER III

### BOB AND BILLY START OUT TO SEEK THEIR FORTUNES

Bob was so divided between anger against Mr. Williams and shame on Billy's account, that for once he had nothing to say in the way of advice.

"How can I ever look any of the fellows in the face again?" he said at last.

"You needn't take it like that," returned Billy. "It wasn't you—better luck for you! I tell you I was mad at first, but then I thought if I took the worst of it, maybe Williams would come down easier on Sandy. He was so mad he was most crazy; I think it sort of relieved his feelings. It wasn't specially comfortable, but it was funny," and Billy's inevitable laugh bubbled over.

"What will mother say?" asked Bob gloomily.

"I don't know," said Billy, his laugh ending in a little sigh. "I'm sorry about her and father: they have to spend a lot of time repenting about me. I'd like to do what they want me to, but it seems terribly hard work. It's good they've got you, Bobs; if it was only me, I guess they'd be about ready to sell out."

Mrs. Boynton's face flushed when she heard the story. But she lightened Bob's despair with a laugh, and her kiss told Billy that, whatever happened, his mother was his friend. The recital to Mr. Boynton was left until after dinner. He listened without a comment, which proved to both boys that he took the matter deeply to heart; his words were for lighter occasions. Billy went to bed with a vague wonder if there were a serious side to life, and Bob followed him convinced that life was mostly gloom.

Mr. Boynton sat in silence for some time, with the frown between his eyes. As he looked up at last and caught the smile in his wife's blue eyes, his forehead smoothed itself out.

"Well, how is it all to come out?" he asked. "So far as I understand the tale, Billy is not to blame in the matter except for his impertinence; for that he must apologize. As for Williams—if I had him here now, he would know what I think of him for striking my boy. He will have to apologize for that, and for telling the youngster he did not speak the truth; he might know Billy better than that. Of course he can't go back to school now; there is no use in bringing fire and tow into contact. Billy should have some one with Job's patience to teach him, and John Will-

iams is a deep scholar and an old friend—but I don't believe he was cut out for an instructor of boys. This couldn't have come at a worse time; I wish they might have pulled along a few weeks. It's a settled thing I am to go abroad, and I shall have to start probably at twelve hours' notice. I thought Aunty Gibbs could come and mind the house, and the boys could keep on at school, and rub along through their vacation—and we'd never be missed. But I can't take them out of school and leave them loafing around here for the rest of the term. I think I'll put them on a farm, as Billy wishes."

Mrs. Boynton looked up with a sudden new idea.

"What do you think of Uncle Silas?" she asked.

"Uncle Silas? Would he take two young scapegraces?"

"He'd do a good deal for me. And the few letters I have had from him since I have been married have always offered to take the boys and make farmers of them. I should be perfectly satisfied to have them there."

"If you are sure your uncle would be willing to take them, I do not see why it would not be a good scheme. The boys are big enough to be able to do some real work to pay for their board, and the disci-

pline will be good for both of them. It will give Billy a chance to see if his wish for a farm is genuine. Will you write to your uncle?"

"Mr. Williams, to see Mr. Boynton, please'm," said Mary.

"I'll write directly. Don't be too severe on the poor man, Will."

She moved across to her desk and Mr. Boynton went into the library to meet Mr. Williams.

The poor old man had calmed down somewhat from his earlier tumult. He was ready now to listen to reason and be convinced of Billy's innocence. He was not sorry to hear Billy was to be removed from his care, though he was sorry to lose Bob. By a few skilful questions, Mr. Boynton drew out a good many facts about Sandy, and could not find anything that essentially contradicted Billy's statements. He offered to take the boy, as Mr. Williams spoke rather slightingly of his capacity for hard work. But at that, the master drew back and refused to spare him on the very edge of summer. His time was up in the fall, and then they would see. Mr. Williams went away at last, sorry for his hasty temper, but at the same time sure that he was much better able to train Billy Boynton than was his father.

Billy beamed and Bob looked sorrowful when they were told they were not to go back to school. Billy's sorrow came later when he sat down to write his letter of apology to Mr. Williams: it was almost a worse punishment than the other. Writing was a trial to Billy. It took him the better part of his morning to get his few lines written and sealed.

"DEAR MR. WILLIAMS:

"Ime sorry I was sorsy. Ime sorry your cow dide. Ide like to help pay for her becorse Sandy is my freind.

"Truly yours,

"WILLIAM BOYNTON, JR."

Mr. Williams's note of apology was slightly more classical. He also accepted Billy's repentance, and sent him back his letter—with all the mistakes corrected.

The third day brought the certainty of the European trip, and also the reply from Uncle Silas. Then Mrs. Boynton unfolded her scheme to the boys.

"Don't mind being sudden or anything," Billy said.

Bob said nothing, but his feelings were written on his face. Mrs. Boynton laughed and patted his head.

"I should think, Bobbins, that after being acquainted with your parents for almost fifteen years,

any of their sudden doings would cease to surprise you. And I've promised your father so often to go with him that I really must this time."

"Take us, too," said Bob.

"I would if you hadn't such terrible appetites and such long legs. We can't afford to feed you and pay for your transportation."

"So you're going off to leave Bob and me—lone, lorn orphans,—to cry our eyes out."

"Yes. You take life hard, Billy. You'll have such a good time that you'll be sorry to see us home. Listen, and I'll tell you what I'm going to do with you. I'm going to send you to stay with Uncle Silas."

"The old chap in New Hampshire that sends us presents sometimes at Christmas?" asked Billy. "It'll be a good thing for him to see us, for then he won't send us fairy-books and popguns next year."

Mrs. Boynton laughed again.

"He has never seen you: he cannot understand you are anything but babies. My mother and I lived with him three years after your grandfather died, but I was only Bob's age when I came away. I never have seen Uncle Silas since. Things have been so that I couldn't go back, and nothing would induce him to come to New York. He never had any children of

his own, so he loved me all the better, I think. He was very good to me, anyhow, and I love him dearly. Here is his letter."

Bob picked it up and read it aloud to his listening brother:

"'DEAR ANNIE:

"'Send the boys along, of course, if you go abroad. Shall be glad to see them. No need to send further word. Lots of room. When you start just express them on.

"'Your aff. uncle,

"'SILAS POLK MAYHEW.'

"He doesn't waste words, does he?" said Bob.

"No; he is queer in some ways, but he is good and kind underneath. He has a big place, and there is sure to be plenty of outdoor work, which is the best thing possible for you. It will do you both good to take care of yourselves. I expect, Billy, to come back to find that you have learned to think enough for yourself to brush your own shoes without being told."

Billy smiled and drew his feet back under his chair.

"How long will you be gone, mother?" Bob asked.

"Three months, I think. We can scarcely do with less time. You must write me as often as you can,

and though I shall not be long enough in any one place to get your letters very regularly, I can write to you."

"When are we going?" asked Billy.

"We sail on Wednesday, little son. I'd like to keep you with me till then and afterward Mary can start you off."

"We won't need any one to start us," said Bob loftily. "Oh, mother, I'll tell you what! We'll ride up on our wheels."

That delightful thought swept away all homesickness. The boys spent their hours in enthusiastic study of road maps and distances and became the envy of their fellows. Sandy shed some quiet tears when he heard of Billy's proposed departure, but listened eagerly to his friend's buoyant chatter.

Mrs. Boynton encouraged to the utmost all the researches and speculations. She had some moments of sober thought herself, as she made her last preparation. The ocean looked wide as she thought of it as rolling between herself and her children. But they were big, strong fellows, and, in her secret heart, she knew that it would be good for them to be left to their own resources. Billy needed to learn self-dependence; and Bob, in a strange place, might discover,

that however clever his own family thought him, he had still something to learn.

So she smothered her own sighs, as mothers have a way of doing, and her boys saw nothing but smiles on her face to the very last.

Mr. Boynton had no fears about his boys roughing it a little.

"You're old enough to take care of yourselves and not get into any mischief," he said. "Don't forget that Mr. Mayhew is very kind to take two youngsters into his house, and do all you can to make yourselves agreeable and useful. I'm going to make each of you an allowance large enough to cover all your necessary expenses while I am away. I want you to live within that and to keep an account of what you spend. You can draw on Mr. Dobbs; he'll tell you how."

All matters were arranged, and the Wednesday came only too soon. The big steamer moved slowly away from the pier, and as their mother's bright face faded from sight, and the boys caught the last wave of their father's hat, each felt a most uncomfortable lump in his throat.

"I don't think much of seeing people off," Billy said. And that was all the conversation there was on the way home.

Once there, there was too much to do to have time for unhappiness. The bags must be packed; the wheels must have a final, close inspection, and the trunk must be started off. Mrs. Boynton had overseen its packing, but Bob refused now any help or suggestion from Mary, who was, on the whole, rather in awe of Master Bob's lofty ways. The lads made ready, therefore, after their own fashion, or rather, after Bob's fashion, Billy, as usual, being content to drift in the wake of his brother's steering.

The trunk was marked "Roberts Boynton, Elmscote, N. H.," and sent off by the expressman. The few things which a boyish mind considers necessities were packed in the canvas bags and strapped to the handle bars. The money was stowed away in divers and peculiar places, lest highwaymen should appear. At last they were quite equipped.

"Don't you think we'd better write to the old gentleman before we start?" Billy asked. "Mother said she'd leave it to us."

"No," said Bob decidedly. "What would be the use? He said particularly that we needn't; and we couldn't get any answer. It would only be a waste of good muscle and writing paper."

"All right, cap'n," answered Billy. "I'm ready.

I'm pretty glad we won't have to sleep in this house to-night. I wonder how mother feels about now ?"

"Come on," said Bob gruffly. He was not ready to talk about his mother just yet.

Mary offered a few last words of vague counsel, and watched her young gentlemen spin down the street. At the corner was Sandy ; he waved his hat, and Billy responded with a happy flourish. As the boys turned out of sight, Sandy brushed his sleeve across his eyes.

"Billy asked me why I didn't run away," he said to himself, with big eyes. "I wonder if I'd dare to."

## CHAPTER IV

### COLONEL WELLINGTON SMITH

THE sky was as blue as June could make it; the country roads were wearing June's freshest green; the birds were singing the songs she had taught them, and the softly stirring air was full of vigor and life. Everything was bright and beautiful, under the influence of the best that summer can offer. With all this and the inspiring motion of their bicycles, what wonder if the boys yielded to the pleasure and thought less often about the big steamship with her nose pointing toward England.

Each morning the sun shone, and each evening the cyclometers showed a good run made; the boys exchanged the remark that the weather had been made for them; and then tumbled sleepily to bed to awaken the next morning to the same even good luck.

Then came the last morning of their ride.

"We'll be there to-night, sure," Bob said. "It's just as well, too, for it's going to rain to-morrow."

"If all the road is like this, we won't get there very early," Billy answered. And then they gave all their attention to picking out the best spots, and let the

conversation drop. At last they came to a steep, stony hill which was too steep to ride. They walked up, and paused on the summit for a moment's rest. Beyond them the road branched.

"Which road is it, captain?" Billy asked.

"The right."

"I'm not so sure of that. Where's the map?"

"The map is way down at the bottom of my bag, and I'm not going to bother to unstrap it. I know it is the right. I looked it all out last night."

"You were so sleepy last night that it made you cross-eyed," said Billy good-naturedly, "and you thought left was right."

"Very well. Go the way you choose. I'm going this way, for I know it's right."

"And if you're right, I suppose I'm left," said Billy. "Go on, captain. I'll follow."

Bob coasted down the hill and took the road of his choice, Billy following close behind. For a long time they rode on in Indian file. Then came a loud report; Bob's tire had exploded.

"That's past my mending," he said ruefully, as he examined his disabled steed. "It's the first bad luck we've had."

"And it hasn't chosen a very good spot to bust in,"

said Billy. "We haven't passed a house on this road, and it doesn't look any more promising ahead. Better get out your map now, Bobs. If we have to walk it let's find the nearest village."

Bob unstrapped his bag without a protest, and the two heads bent over the map together.

"Here's the fork in the road," said Billy. "And here's Elmscote way off here to the left."

"Where are we then?" Bob said shortly. He did not like to be proved wrong.

"We're in the soup, I guess. And the soup must be about—over—here. Only I don't smell anything half so good, and I'm tearing hungry."

"There doesn't seem to be a town nearer than the one we started from this morning," Bob said. "And that is way back of the fork."

"And a fork isn't much use for soup," commented Billy, lying back lazily on the grass.

They were in something of a scrape, but Bob would pull them out: he always did Billy did not trouble himself as to the means.

"How much money have you?" asked Bob.

"Only about half a dollar. I paid the bill out of my last stocking this morning, and it's a lot more comfortable without it."

Bob pulled a handful of silver and copper from his pocket.

"That's all I have," he said looking at it doubtfully. "I don't believe we have enough money to go back and risk staying over another night."

"Let me count it," said Billy, and he spread the little heap out before him.

But he had not touched the first dime before a fiery young black horse came dashing around a curve in the road. Bob had to move quickly to get himself and his bicycle out of the way.

The horse was ridden by an elderly gentleman, who kept his seat perfectly, although the little horse, when he was pulled up, did not stand still an instant.

"In trouble?" the gentleman asked in such a hearty voice that Billy came to his feet at once.

"I've exploded my tire, sir," said Bob, "and I was looking up the nearest place to get it mended."

"And Smithtown seems to be the nearest place, and it is pretty far behind us," added Billy, with his genial smile.

"There's better than that," said the stranger. "Stand still, Romeo! Just two miles ahead is a little village where you ought to be able to get your machine mended. Look out for yourself, my boy! I

think I'd better get out of this, or my horse will be responsible for some more broken wheels—or bones. Whoa, Romeo! Cash low, too, is it? Maybe this will help you out. Keep straight ahead on this road ——" and the old gentleman, with a salute with his riding stock, tossed a silver dollar at Billy's feet. The black horse, glad to be released, carried his rider out of sight in a few moments.

"I'd like to ride like that," said Billy, some animation firing his blue eyes. "He sits like a soldier. I bet he's a general, at the very least, a regular Wellington, like as not." As he stooped for the dollar, he saw a bit of cardboard had fallen with it.

"'Colonel Wellington Smith,'" he read, picking up the card. "There! What did I tell you, Bobs? He's a colonel and a Wellington too. And this is a medal, and he's decorated me." Billy tossed the coin into the air and caught it again.

"Don't be a donkey," said Bob. "He's the nabob of Smithtown, most likely. Pick up the few pennies we have left and come on. If there's a place to get my wheel mended, let's find it."

The road grew rougher with every step, and the boys were beginning to think they had again missed their way, when they came upon the little village.

It was too secluded a place to be accustomed to travelers. The boys were stared at from all sides, but no one could tell Bob who would mend his wheel, or Billy who would give him a luncheon. At last an enterprising urchin suggested the blacksmith as a possible mender of wheels, and conducted Bob to his house.

It was a tiny white cottage with green blinds, and the kitchen in an extension behind. A brook ran down under the fence beside it, with some bars between the house and the brook. In the door-yard were a few straggling flowers, and, in one corner, was a tall pole with a ship on top of it serving as weather-vane.

Bob knocked three times at the front door before he got a response. Then came dragging steps and a long fumbling with the key, and at last a woman opened the door. Bob inquired for Mr. Stubbins.

"He ain't home," she said.

"Some one told me he could mend my wheel," Bob said, "and I'm in a great hurry."

"If he can't, no one can't," Mrs. Stubbins answered. "But he won't be home till termorrer."

Billy smiled his sweetest smile.

"Do you know where we could get something to eat?" he asked.

"There ain't nobody sells vittles in this here town," Mrs. Stubbins began stiffly, but she melted under Billy's steady beam. "Wall, I dunno," she went on slowly. "Ef you ain't over-partickelar, I might get you up a mess of food."

"But my wheel," said Bob.

"Oh, we can think about that while we're eating," answered Billy.

The meal was not a large one, consisting only of some stewed tomatoes and fried potatoes.

Bob's fastidiousness revolted, but Billy did not quarrel with any food that was moderately filling. Bob turned his attention to their future plans, and questioned Mrs. Stubbins while his brother ate. She had been suspicious of her visitors at first, but when she once yielded to Bob's good manners and Billy's good nature, she showed herself so genial a hostess that the boys felt at once her honesty and kindness.

The result of the consultation was a reluctant decision to leave the bicycles with Mrs. Stubbins and trust to their own legs to carry them into Elmscote.

If they had taken the left fork of the road, they would by this time have been near that town. They were just about opposite now, but "the mountain" lay between the two villages. The Elmscote road went

twisting around the shoulder of the hill, in the valley on the other side of it. The road the boys had taken ended abruptly in this small hamlet. But over the hill was a path that connected the village with the larger town beyond.

"The path ain't much to speak of," said Mrs. Stubbins, "but two smart young fellers ought to be able to keep it. Or—I ken keep you over night, if you'd like to stay."

Bob thanked her hastily, but was sure they could find the path. If no one in the village but Mr. Stubbins could mend the wheel, then it must wait for him. The boys would go on to their uncle's for the night; come back to-morrow for the bicycles; get back as best they might to the branching of the road, and thence ride them into Elmscote by the longer but smoother way.

Bob planned and questioned and wrinkled his brow while Billy ate.

"These tomatoes are nothing to the stew you're in, Bobs," he laughed. "Cheer up, and come along. You can't find any better way."

The boys strapped their bags, therefore, across their shoulders, put their precious wheels in a safe place, and waited to listen to Mrs. Stubbins's last directions.

"You jest go through them bars and foller the brook right up the hill, for mebbe two miles. Then you ease off to the right a little and you strike another brook goin' t'other way, and you foller that right down inter the town. The path's kinder faint, but you can't miss the way owin' to the brooks. Be you goin' to stay long to Elmscote?"

Bob had already started ahead, but Billy turned back to answer politely,

"Yes'm. We're going to stay all summer. We're going to visit our uncle, Mr. Silas Mayhew: do you know him?"

Mrs. Stubbins dropped the cup she was holding and it fell with a crash to the floor. She herself sank into the nearest chair.

"My!" she exclaimed. "You don't say!"

## CHAPTER V

### BOB LOOKS FOR THE BROOK AND FINDS AN UNCLE

"DID you see the old lady faint when I told her we were going to Uncle Silas's?" Billy asked as he joined his brother.

"What do you mean?"

"I told her where we were going, and she tumbled over and broke her teacup. Do you suppose Uncle Silas is as peculiar as all that?"

Bob stopped in his interest.

"Why didn't you make her tell you some more?"

"How could I have a polite conversation when you were going down the road like an express train? Besides, I was embarrassed. I'm not used to having people taken with fits when I mention my relatives. The relatives give me fits sometimes, but that's all in the family. You can take the bars down, Bobby, for you like work, you know, and I don't."

"All the more reason you should do it," Bob answered, going over the top bar with a clean jump. "You can come like that, or put down your own bars, or go back and have your talk out with Mrs. Stubbins."

Billy's laugh was still good-natured, as he dropped the bars, and went through in his leisurely fashion. Bob was quite a bit up the hill and had found the grassy path beside the foaming, tumbling brook before Billy caught him again.

The clouds, which had been creeping thicker and thicker over the sky since early morning, now suddenly opened and sent down their first drops on the boys' heads.

"We're going to get wet," said Bob, stopping to survey the clouds.

"We certainly are, if it keeps on raining as wet rain as this. Want to go back and stay all night?"

"Not if I know myself. But I don't think much more of Mrs. Stubbins's path than I do of her food."

Indeed, the path seemed to have fallen into the brook, so suddenly did it end. But the brook was left for guide and the two boys stumbled up the hill under the rain that was coming down now in a steady pelting way that very soon left no dry thing within its reach.

They had not gone half a mile before Billy stopped. Their clothes were clinging and clammy, and their feet wet through; they were leg weary and arm weary

with fighting their way through the close underbrush and over the slippery ground.

"No use in this, Bobs; might as well give it up," said Billy.

"Don't be a donkey. We've got to go somewhere, and I'm not going back. I think this is the easiest path; we certainly can't get any wetter"—and Bob stepped coolly into the brook.

"The path of Bobby leads but to the brook," murmured Billy. But he followed.

For the next hour the boys did little talking. Scrambling up hill through the bed of a running brook took all their attention. They slipped and stumbled over the rocks, and felt the rain dripping down their necks. But still they struggled on, for Billy found it was more labor to remonstrate than to follow. The brook took many turns, and had many small branches, and their path was a long one.

At length the indefatigable Bob stopped, and Billy drew a breath of relief.

"This is surely the top," Bob said. "Now for the brook going 't'other way.'"

"You wouldn't find an ocean through that tangle: much less a brook."

"We've got to make a try for it, though. I wish we had a compass."

"There's one in the right hand corner of my top drawer. I'd have brought it if you'd told me to. Really, Bobs, don't you think we're idiots to try to get through all these bushes?"

"What else is there to do? I don't suppose you care to sit down here for a picnic. That brook is over there somewhere to the right, and we've got to make a break and find it."

"All right, captain," said Billy cheerily. "Go ahead and I'll follow. But don't talk about picnics. I'm fairly starved."

"We might have brought some lunch with us," said Bob.

"But if we had," answered philosophical Billy, "it would all have been gruel by this time. Crickets! Bob, I'd as soon plough a ten acre lot as get through this plantation."

"She might have made her directions a little more definite. This is the right, sure enough, but how are we going to know how much to 'ease off'?"

Billy bubbled over into a laugh.

"Oh, that's the easiest part. But if you can be too

right, captain, I think you're being it. I'm sure we're going too far north."

"That's where you're wrong," said Bob triumphantly, "for listen to the brook."

There was the brook just ahead, and the boys struggled through the remaining bushes to reach it.

"Well, it can't be so hard going down as it was coming up: that's the only consolation I see," said Bob.

"I suppose it's neck or nothing again," said Billy dangling a foot over the brink:

> "Oh brooklet, little brooklet,
> To whom the luckless pray —
> A Boynton's heels and a Boynton's head
> Take thou in charge this day."

The rocks were quite as steep and slippery in this brook as in the other, and the boys' heads and heels were in danger of changing places more than once during the next half hour. But they stumbled down as they had stumbled up.

"There's more water on this mountain than I ever saw before in my life," said Bob. "See, our river is going to flow into another one."

"It'll get there before we do too, at the rate it's going. Hello, look at that old codger."

Under a big tree, for shelter, sat an old man munching on a piece of bread. At sight of the boys, he thrust it into his pocket, and, turning away, gazed over the dim landscape.

"Pretty wet weather," called out Billy cheerfully. "How far are we from Elmscote?"

The man glanced at them over his shoulder and answered briefly:

"Three miles."

"Three miles!" echoed Billy. "Why, I'm sure we've gone five already. Which way did you come?"

The other made an impatient movement over his shoulder with his thumb and turned his back resolutely on the boys.

"Are you sure it's so far as that?" persisted Billy.

"You won't never get there if you don't start," snapped the stranger.

"Come on, Billy," said Bob from the front. He never enjoyed his brother's wayside conversations.

"Good-bye," called Billy, and plunged on after Bob.

"Hey!" called the man.

The boys turned to see him making the same awkward gesture with his thumbs.

"The man is crazy," said Bob. "Come on; we're wasting too much time."

Billy nodded at the old man, who kept up his motions. He looked back once more a moment later, and the gesticulation was still going on. Then the hill hid him from their sight.

"I think he was afraid we were going to rob him of his piece of bread," laughed Billy. "I'm hungry enough."

"Dry clothes and a dinner don't sound half bad."

"I hope it'll be roast-beef. And apple-pie for dessert. I could swallow an ox and an orchard without winking."

But all that Billy swallowed just then was a dash of rain, which warned him to keep his mouth closed for the present. The boys plodded on again, making pictures in their mind of Uncle Silas's big, comfortable house; of bright open fires, of a cozy, lighted dining-room with an overflowing table—and of soft warm beds after that.

"We're getting there," said Bob, suddenly. "There's a clearing."

"And a house," said Billy. "And a fire, for see the smoke."

A few steps more brought the house plainly into view. It was white, with green blinds and a little extension kitchen. In one corner of the door-yard was a long

pole, holding aloft a weather vane. The brook went tumbling down under the fence beside it.

"Those bars look familiar, somehow," said Billy, watching Bob's face.

With a howl of laughter, Bob yielded up his dignity and flung himself down on the grass.

"Once there was a chicken that walked all day around a peck measure and thought she had gone to Europe," said Billy. "Have a little pity on the grass, Bobby: your clothes can make even that wetter."

Draggled Bob picked himself and his dignity again from the earth.

"Did you ever hear of two such idiots! To work as we have this whole afternoon, and come back to just the place we started from! How did we ever do it?"

"It was the 'easing' did it," said Billy, still cheerful. "I told you so," was not in his vocabulary.

"Well! it's farewell, roast beef, and welcome fried potatoes—that's all. Come on, Bobby; there's no use in crying over spilt milk or spilt water either. That's what did it, you see; forks are dangerous for us; we'll have to keep to spoons. We kept too much to the north and instead of finding the Elmscote brook, we got a fork of our own brook that brought us back just the way we went."

"And that's what that crazy old chap was trying to tell us," said Bob. "But why didn't he say we were going the wrong way, instead of waving his arms around."

"Never mind the crazy chap," said Billy. "Come where Stubbins awaits thee!"

Mrs. Stubbins opened her kitchen door to the dripping, shame-faced lads, and threw up her hands in amazement.

"Sakes! You don't say it's you again. It's as much as ever I'd know you. If you ain't for all the world like two drownded rats. Wouldn't he take you in?"

"We never got there," said Bob.

"We never got anywhere but most terribly lost," said Billy, "but we're hungry as Samson, and wet as Ararat."

"Come in, come in," said Mrs. Stubbins. "Sakes! you needn't mind a little water; it'll all mop up. I've been worretin' a little about you this afternoon, and that's a fact. Now, I wonder what I can do for you! You can't stay in them wet things, and you can't wear Zekle's cloes any way you can fix it. They'd hold ten o' you breadth-wise, but his pants wouldn't more'n come to your knees. Best thing is, if you're agreea-

ble, for you just to go to bed for a spell whilst I dry your cloes up for you."

Bob, humble and repentant for his former ingratitude, meekly yielded. A small staring and silent Johnnie Stubbins was sent into the room to bring out the heap of clammy clothes, and in great comfort the shivering boys cuddled down in the clean blankets.

"I'll send you in some readin' jest as soon as I get these things rensed out," called their hostess through the chinks of the wall, for the rooms of the blacksmith boasted no plaster.

So presently Johnnie appeared once more with two big books—the entire library of the household;—"Pilgrim's Progress," and the "Life of James Fiske, Jr." The boys quarreled good-naturedly over the choice of literature, but they were really both too tired to be diverted had Shakespeare himself appeared. They fell asleep almost at once, and slept soundly until the voice of Mrs. Stubbins through the crack brought them back to consciousness.

"If you're rested now and het up good, your cloes is ready and I'll get you a mouthful to eat. I ain't got much, but hunger's a good sauce."

Mrs. Stubbins had consumed a good deal of wood in getting the jackets and trousers dry. The under-

clothes had been washed out and ironed. "Except for an awful hole inside," as Billy said, the boys felt quite themselves when they were dressed.

Billy tried to look grave, but he could not help a twinkle at Bob as they sat down to supper. The remains of the potatoes and tomatoes reappeared, flanked by a plate of bread. But Bob was too hungry now to be fussy, and when the boys had finished there was nothing left for another meal.

Before they went to bed Bob tried point blank to draw from his hostess what she knew of his uncle. But Mrs. Stubbins was vagueness itself and not to be wheedled out of any information.

Long before the boys awoke the next morning, the sun was shining from the newly-washed June sky; and Mr. Ezekiel Stubbins was making the best breakfast possible from his wife's emptied pantry. He listened with interest to her account of the boarders she had taken in during his absence; and then inspected the bicycle.

"Sho, yes. I can mend that," he said; and straightway went to work.

"I feel real helpless about gettin' you up a breakfast," Mrs. Stubbins said to the boys when they appeared.

Billy looked as mournful as his happy face could look.

"That brook looks as if it ought to have trout in it," he said.

"Trout? Sakes, yes; they're as thick as grasshoppers. But we don't hanker after 'em much. Do you like trout?"

"Rather," said Billy, energetically.

"Sakes! Then, Johnnie, go and ketch a mess," ordered Mrs. Stubbins. And Johnnie, with no preparation but taking an old hat from the floor, went out for his fishing. Bob and Billy were absorbed in watching the mending of Bob's wheel.

"So you fellers belong to old Silas Mayhew," said the blacksmith. "I shouldn't 'a' thought it. Do you know how to find him? He lives clost down under the mountain, so it's a good piece out o' Elmscot village. A pretty pesky, twistin' sorter road, too, but it's the first house after the blacksmith's forge."

"I think we'll get our directions on paper this time," Bob said, with a little laugh at his yesterday's experience. Mr. Stubbins stopped his work to bend over the map, and, between them, they located Uncle Silas's house beyond possibility of mistake.

"Do you know Mr. Mayhew?" Bob asked with an effort at carelessness.

"I don't know anybody in these parts over well," answered Mr. Stubbins, going back to his work. "I hev seen Silas Mayhew, for he comes over the mountain oncet in a while for a pair o' shoes: they're cheaper and better here. I was over to Elmscote oncet and I see his house as I come back over the mountain. They do say he didn't treat his wife real good, but she died years back, and folks allus likes to talk. I ain't been here six months, but I've heard a terrible lot o' talk. This is a mighty pretty wheel o' yourn."

Bob was always ready to talk bicycle, and, in that deeper interest, the peculiarities of Uncle Silas remained unexplored.

By the time Johnnie returned with his catch, the boys were more than ready for him. Mrs. Stubbins's eyes grew round with wonder as she fried and the boys ate. Twenty small trout had leaped from the frying-pan down the lads' throats before Billy leaned back with a sigh of content.

"Well, I'm glad you've got one square meal to last you," was her comment as the boys arose. "Zekle's got your wheel mended, so I suppose you'll want to be movin' on."

Mrs. Stubbins left the room, and the boys pro-

ceeded to reckon their resources. One quarter of a dollar had gone for yesterday's luncheon. Now there was a bed and a supper and a breakfast, beside a broken wheel and the motherly care they had received. The money was laid on the table and made a very small heap of coin.

"Two quarters and a nickel," said Billy.

"Four dimes, three nickels and two pennies," said Bob. "That makes one dollar and twelve cents. Of course there's that other dollar, but we won't use that."

"No, we won't use Colonel Wellington Smith's dollar," said Billy, feeling for it in his pocket. "If we ever see him we'll give it back. If we don't I'm going to keep it—just for fun."

Bob went off to pay the bill and came back smiling.

"Twenty-five cents for lodging; one quarter for supper and one for breakfast: and a quarter for the wheel. She wouldn't hear a word about the washings, and I gave Johnnie ten cents for catching all those trout, so there are just two cents left in the treasury."

"Fortune favors the brave," Billy said.

The farewells were effusive and the boys rode away with all the Stubbins family gazing after them. There were no more break-downs, and the riding, after they

had reached the main road, was fairly smooth and pleasant. Billy was too generous and Bob too proud to make any comments on their past. But both boys reflected that if they had not gone wrong the day before, they would by this time have been safe at Uncle Silas's without all their uncomfortable experience.

They ran into Elmscote about twelve o'clock. Their directions were so explicit that they wasted no time in asking questions, but kept on through the village. Four miles out their road led them before they reached the blacksmith shop. The blacksmith was standing in the doorway, such a surly-looking fellow that the boys did not wait to speak to him.

Half a mile further on they stopped at a farmhouse with a somewhat rickety picket fence in front of it. A man in shirt-sleeves and faded trousers was weeding in the garden.

"Is this where Mr. Silas Mayhew lives?" Bobby asked, jumping from his wheel.

The man did not move. "It be," he said laconically.

"Is Mr. Mayhew at home? Can we see him?"

"I reckon you can if you look hard enough," the old man said with a chuckle. "I'm him."

He straightened himself and turned his wrinkled face toward the boys.

"Crickets!" said Billy under his breath. "It's the crazy man we saw on the mountain!"

## CHAPTER VI

### UNCLE SILAS BORROWS AN OIL-CAN

So this was Uncle Silas! This "crazy man" was the one their mother had told them was a little peculiar, but, nevertheless, a dear old man. Perhaps his peculiarities showed out first and his goodness afterward. Or, was it possible that he had changed somewhat in all the years since their mother had seen him?

"We are your nephews," Bob said with a sinking heart. "I suppose you have been expecting us?"

Mr. Mayhew returned to his grubbing.

"Why didn't you speak up yisterday and say who you was?"

"We didn't know you yesterday. And you said we needn't send word."

"Expect to stay long?"

"We meant to stay all summer—till mother comes back."

"Then I expect you mean to pay a little board?"

"Why, yes, certainly, if you want us to," faltered Bob.

"I guess a little somethin' wouldn't be amiss ef you cakkleate on stayin' the hull summer. You're likely lookin' fellers; you'll be able to len' a hand on the farm?"

"Yes, mother said we were to help."

The old man nodded his head approvingly and grew a shade more cordial.

"That's sensible; real sensible. You might better be workin' at somethin' useful than breakin' your backs ridin' them machines around the country. Well, as you ain't sent me no word, you'll have to take me as you find me, that's all."

"Certainly," said Bob again.

"I hope you ain't allus as dumb as you was yisterday. What possessed you to go jest the wrong way?"

"We didn't understand quite what you meant."

"Well, well, I'll have to speak plainer. And so you're Mary Ann's boys?"

"Mother's name is Annie," said Billy, stoutly.

The old man gave another chuckle.

"She's took notions sense she got rich. She used to be plain Mary Ann when she wore caliker dresses and helped me milk the cwows. Does she enjoy good health?"

"We haven't heard yet."

"Oh, yes, oh, yes, she's away, ain't she? Well, what next?"

"Are we too late for lunch?" asked Billy anxiously.

"Well, I hev eat my dinner. But I ken get you up a snack o' somethin' if you're real hungry."

"I'm fair starved," said Billy, with his beaming smile.

Bob could more easily have cried. He wanted his home and he wanted his mother. This big, lonely place with the unattractive old man for a companion all summer looked appalling. Such things did not matter much to Billy.

"Can we wash up a little first?" asked Bob.

"Kinder finicky, are you? Well, come along. I'll show you where you can stow away. But if you want some water, you'd better fetch it along."

He led the way through the kitchen, up a dark, narrow stairway with a musty smell, into a little chamber under the roof. It held a three-quarter bed, one chair, a tiny old-fashioned wash-stand, and a small chest of drawers. The floor was bare. In part of the room the boys could not stand upright, and there was but one window. Even Billy thought of the luxurious rooms he and Bob occupied at home.

The old man hobbled away and came back with one

small towel, which he presented with so much complacency that Bob was ashamed to ask for a second.

"I'll leave your vittles on the kitchen table, and you can git 'em after you git your swaller-tails on," chuckled Mr. Mayhew, and then he left them.

"We never can stand this," Bob exclaimed. "If that old man is our uncle, he's mercenary and—and—he isn't clean. I don't see how we can stay all summer."

"It isn't a palace just exactly," assented Billy. "But then we aren't princes either. Lots of fellows live like this, and I guess we can. Mother sent us."

"But it couldn't have been like this when she lived here; or else she's forgotten about it in all these years."

"Well, she sent us anyhow," said Billy the philosopher. "Go ahead and wash. It isn't as bad as if it was twice as bad. I'm hungry. The old gentleman didn't look over-anxious to provide us a meal and if we keep him waiting he may repent."

The washing did not take long—with a small bowl, one towel, and little change of clothing. The boys found the kitchen empty; on the bare pine table was a dish of "cold boiled greens," with two plates and two three-tined steel forks.

Billy's laugh almost made the dishes rattle in the dresser. He drew out one of the wooden chairs with a flourish.

"Luncheon is served, Your Grace," he said, and laughed again at Bob's gloomy face. Then he fell to a sturdy attack upon the greens, and had made way with the larger part of them before his brother could decide to join him.

The boys borrowed a wheelbarrow that afternoon, and went to the station for their trunk. There was not much unpacking to be done, for, in their cramped space, they could put away very little. And, as Bob dolefully remarked, it did not look as though they would need any clothes but overalls and jumpers.

Before supper time both boys had learned what work means.

"I ain't going to make company of you," Mr. Mayhew said. "You look to be smart; come, and I'll learn you how to milk the cwows."

To Billy the lesson was unnecessary, for his friendship with Sandy had taught him much of this kind of work. He drew a word of praise from the gruff old man, and finished by triumphantly milking Sukey, who kicked whenever she disliked what was going on. Billy loved animals as much as he hated books.

To Bob it was all hard. He was clumsy about learning and the cows felt his strangeness. He was obliged to stop, at last, disgusted and mortified. He was not used to having Billy get ahead of him.

Then came a supper of bread and milk. Bob never drank milk, and his meal was a slim one.

"You ain't eat a great deal," said the old man, as he pushed back his chair. "Well, all the more for the pigs."

When the animals were cared for for the night, the boys were glad enough to go to bed.

"How many hours have we been here?" asked Bob. "Seven, haven't we? And I've found out four peculiarities of Uncle Silas already, and I haven't seen one nice thing. I suppose the goodness must be somewhere, for mother said so."

"Oh he isn't half bad," said Billy.

"You think so because you can milk his old 'cwows, and he likes you. Besides you'd rather eat with dirty hands than not, and you don't mind how he looks. And he's stingy as he can be. He took every bit of cream off the milk to-night and just gave us pigs' food—and then was glad we didn't drink all his old skim-milk."

"He has to save his cream for the creamery."

"Yes. That's all he cares for—to make money—except getting all the work he can out of people."

"That's four, isn't it?" asked Billy with a sleepy laugh. "Dirt, stinginess, love of money and love of work. Don't let's find any more. Come on to bed."

"The mattress is made of corn-husks," said Bob, "and there's a big cob on my side."

"We'll take turns. I'll sleep on it to-morrow," said Billy, and then he fell asleep. Bob tossed for awhile, but followed him at length in spite of his grievances. It seemed as if he had just closed his eyes when he opened them again at the call of a harsh, rasping voice. "Come, boys, come, boys, breakfast is ready," it was sounding up the stairs.

The day was scarcely beyond dawn, and that is not an easy hour for a growing boy to turn out. Bob almost despaired of waking Billy, but a tumble on the floor and a very wet sponge did at length open his blue eyes.

The thick coffee and salt pork in the not over-clean kitchen were something of a contrast to their breakfast at home. But it did not trouble Billy. He ate his own portion and half of Bob's; and even then could have managed a bit more.

"You ought to be a good worker," Mr. Mayhew said drily, as he saw things disappear down Billy's throat.

"What'll we do first?" asked Billy happily.

"Well, there's the dishes to wash, and your own room to red up; I guess the slim feller can do that kind of work, and you can come with me. I guess we'll get to mowing the big lot by and by."

It was Bob's first experience as housemaid, but he went through with his duties in a fashion; making faces over the greasy plates, and wondering why this bed should turn out such rolling country, when his bed at home was always a plateau.

When the mowing came on, it was Billy who was allowed to mount the machine, because he knew how to handle the reins: while Bob blistered his hands and made numberless cricks in his back, trying to learn to swing a scythe. He tried to imagine it a golf-stick, but it made rather a poor game. He grew hot and impatient, but he kept doggedly at work: it was not Bob's way to give up an attempt. He had been sent here to learn farming, and if he failed it would not be because he had not tried.

Billy meanwhile was circling the field in a somewhat serpentine manner. Mr. Mayhew watched him

till he was sure he could get on, and then turned away to another piece of work.

It was half an hour before he came back, and then the machine was squeaking painfully.

"Hi, hi there!" he called. "Don't you know your machine needs iling?"

"Where's the can?" asked Billy, pulling up Major and Dobbin.

"In the kitchen pantry."

Off ran Billy, whistling, and presently came back with the can.

"I found my hat in the closet too," he said. "I couldn't find it anywhere this morning."

Mr. Mayhew paid no attention to his remark, but he took the oil-can.

"Dry as a whistle," he said. "I kinder suspicioned it: that's a pretty kettle of fish."

"I'll ride to the village and get some," said Bob, straightening his aching back.

"No you won't," said Mr. Mayhew roughly. "The village ain't no place for boys to be fooling around in. There's no call for you to go to any village; we'll have to borrer some ile."

"At the blacksmith's?"

"No, not at any blacksmith's. He wouldn't give

nothin' to his own grandmother, least of all he wouldn't to me. No, you go to Pig Polly's and see if she'll give you some. Mebbe she will and mebbe she won't. Which o' you goes the fastest?"

"Bob," answered Billy, "and I'll try a swing at his scythe while he's gone."

Bob dropped it gratefully. He asked no questions, but took his instructions and the can in silence.

"You go on a piece down the path through the woods till you come to the river there: you'll see her house t'other side. Be spry now and see you don't stay to talk."

Bob went off across the field and through the woodland until he came to a wide brook. Beyond it he saw a little cabin and numerous outhouses.

"A great river," he said scornfully. "There isn't even a bridge, but there are some stepping-stones."

The stepping-stones ended in a door-yard. Near to the water stood a wagon with a large slatted cage in the back; it was filled with little pigs. At sight of Bob they tumbled over each other in their eagerness and squealed shrilly. It was evidently a signal for the opening of Bedlam. From every one of the many pig-pens came grunts or squeals, and Bob could see hungry snouts in every crack. Bob stopped in bewilderment.

He could think of nothing but the story of Circe, and, for a moment, wondered if he should fall under her spell?

"I should think it was 'Pig Polly' with a vengeance," he muttered. "But if I'm going to get the oil I suppose I must find the lady herself."

The door-yard was perfectly neat and clean. Bob went up the trodden path which led to a side door in the little house. There he stopped and lifted his hand to knock. From inside came a groan, and Bob's hand fell.

"Circe, sure enough," he said.

## CHAPTER VII

### SANDY RUNS AWAY

Bob hesitated a moment and then laughed at his own fears. But his heart beat a trifle faster than usual as he once more raised his hand and knocked.

There was no answer but a slight rustling sound.

Bob knocked again. After an instant's pause a voice cried, "Come in."

Bobby pushed the door open on a crack and then opened it wide. Before him was a small room, white and clean as care could make it. Sitting in an arm-chair was a big woman in a calico dress as clean as the room itself. She had a round kindly face and her small eyes shone with good-nature.

"Well, what do you want?" she asked in a high voice that came oddly from her big body. "Come to look for a place?"

Bob recovered his self-possession, pulled off his hat and stepped inside the doorway.

"Good-morning," he said with his best manner. "Mr. Mayhew sent me to see if I could borrow any oil."

Pig Polly only stared. Bob grew a little uneasy under her steady gaze. His own eyes wandered around the room in order to avoid looking at Pig Polly, and fell on the little cooking-stove before the chimney. It looked dull and black, and the smoke was pushing out of the cracks on top.

"Oughtn't the draught to be open?" he ventured.

Pig Polly nodded.

"Shall I open it?"

Again Mrs. Polly bent her head.

Bob opened the draught, poked up the fire and soon had it burning briskly.

"I'll fill the kettle if you like," he said, "it's empty."

"There's the well," answered Pig Polly, pointing.

The sight of Bobby in the yard set all the pigs squealing again.

"I'll choose the wagon for my pen if she turns me into a pig," said Bobby laughing. He carried the water into the house, and, by this time, Mrs. Polly had found her tongue.

"Where does your Mr. Mayhew live?" she asked abruptly.

"Just over the brook about half a mile."

"Just over the brook, eh?" she repeated. "What're you to him?"

"I'm his nephew; at least he's my mother's uncle. I'm staying with him—I and my brother—for a few weeks."

Pig Polly grunted. Bob's embarrassment was growing too great to endure.

"Could you spare any oil?" he asked.

Pig Polly's round face could not look very cross, but just now it was as cross as it ever could be.

"What does he want?" she asked. "Is he going to have a dinner-party and make some salad?"

"I wish he was," said Bob. "I've most forgotten how it tastes. He wants oil, to oil the mowing-machine with."

"And what does he mean by trying to borrow anything of me!" asked Pig Polly with such sudden fierceness that Bob jumped. "Afraid to come himself, wasn't he? Good reason, too. I've got no oil for him, and he might know it if he stopped to think."

"Good-bye, then," said Bobby, turning to go.

"No, hold on, hold on," cried Mrs. Polly. "Like as not he won't be very nice to you if you go back without it. You're a pretty-behaved boy; you ain't a mite like old Silas Mayhew. Wait a minute."

She tried to rise, but settled back with a groan.

"No use. I can't move; hurt my foot; tried to make a fire; can't get near the pigs; expect they'll starve."

"I'll feed them for you," said Bob.

The old woman's face softened again, and again the small eyes scanned the boy intently. She shook her head as if she could not fathom a mystery.

"It's real good of you," she said. "I didn't have any call to speak so rough to you, but old Silas Mayhew is the one thing on the earth that riles me. I won't forget what you've done for me. There's the food, and you'll find the pigs by their voices."

Presently the inmates of all the pens were pushing and scrambling with strict breakfast etiquette. Bob left them and went back to their owner.

"Look under the sink there for the oil," she said. "Little as I'd do for old Silas, I can't refuse you."

But Polly's oil-can was as empty as Mr. Mayhew's.

"Now ain't that too bad," she exclaimed. "I'd have liked to help you. What did you say you was to old Silas?"

"His nephew," Bob answered, picking up his hat. "Good-bye. I'm sorry your foot hurts."

"Wait a minute. Don't go too fast. There's a pie

in the pantry there. Cut yourself a good piece and eat it as you run. I can't make it out."

Bobby's pie had disappeared before he reached the hay-field. He found Mr. Mayhew fuming over the delay. His temper was not made better by Bob's failure.

"So she wouldn't give you any," he said. "I might have known she'd be ugly. What did she say to you?"

"She only asked who I was and said she didn't have any oil."

"Why did she take to asking you questions? Didn't I tell you not to talk to her?"

"I didn't talk. I fed her pigs because she's hurt her foot and couldn't walk."

"Well, you needn't talk to her and you needn't go to see her any more. She's laid up, is she? Guess I'll have to look after her a little. There ain't much of the field left to mow now and we'll just have to finish it by hand since Pig Polly don't care to be obligin'. Get right to work."

So Bobby, fortified by his apple-pie, and Billy, upheld by his good-nature, began again to swing their scythes. Uncle Silas kept in the lead, once in awhile chuckling to himself. Then he murmured,

"Laid up, is she? I'll have to go over and help her out."

After that, the boys found little time for paying visits or for any other form of amusement. The bicycles stood idle in the barn, while the farm tools hardened the boys' hands and brought out more muscles in their bodies than they ever had suspected to be there. It was the busy time of year, and Mr. Mayhew had a rare genius for keeping hands employed. When he was at home the boys were never idle. When he went away it was always with the injunction that the boys were not to leave the place in his absence. They submitted with the ready deference they had always been taught to yield to their elders, but they had, too, little wish to disobey. After the long day of out-of-door work, their only desire at evening was to take their sleepy heads to their hard bed.

Even on Sunday the "chores" dragged on so in the morning that they lasted till long past church time. The only moments of real freedom were the Sunday afternoons. Then Bob found his chance to write his letter to his mother, and to get a quiet hour with a book in the green fresh woods, where the brook fell tinkling down beside him.

To Billy the life was not unpleasant. The disorderly living did not trouble his easy nature, and he was happy in the fact that no one ever told him to wash his hands or blacken his shoes, or even remotely suggested a lesson book. Mowing, and tossing hay were novel and exciting amusements: driving the cows out of their hilly pasture down to their milking-shed in the fresh morning hours almost paid for waking up so early. He felt the responsibility of keeping the hay dry, and of watching the grain ripen for harvesting. Even the weeds, growing more lustily than the vegetables they were choking, were pleasanter companions than a Latin grammar. And Billy was so continually hungry that nothing came amiss in the way of food.

But bookish Bob knew himself the wrong man in the wrong place. He tried conscientiously to like salt pork, but he often went hungry because he could not eat what was offered him. He did his best with Sukey and Jinny and their sisters: he worked faithfully, indeed, at whatever he was set, but always with a disheartening sense of failure. His weeding was better than his brother's, but in everything else Billy rushed happily and triumphantly ahead, leaving Bob, in his uncongenial surroundings to plod on as best he

might. It was a hard experience for him, aside from the constant jarring to his fastidious nature. He had always led with no effort and did not know how to fall gracefully into second place. He was so quiet that Mr. Mayhew called him sulky and asked why he wasn't more like his brother. But Bob was a plucky lad. He did his best in spite of discouragement and when he wrote those Sunday letters to his mother, he kept his troubles out of them. He told her of the farm work, and said nothing of the discomfort around him and his longing for his own home.

Bob had added another peculiarity of Mr. Mayhew's to his list. The old man had a passion for hiding things: he was a veritable jackdaw. The hat that Billy had found in the kitchen closet, disappeared again the next day: his Sunday jacket, thrown on the floor of his room, was not to be found; Bob was stopped short in the most interesting part of his story because the book had vanished from mortal eyes. Billy found his coat hanging behind a door in a dark corner of the barn and reclaimed it. Mr. Mayhew made no remarks, but in a day or two the jacket was gone again. Bob needed but one lesson. After he discovered his book in the case of the old clock, he kept all his belongings under the key of his trunk.

But Billy had been too long accustomed to dropping his things wherever he might chance to be, to reform, and he spent many odd minutes in hunting out his property. He took it easily, as he took all living; only wondering lazily at times if it might not really pay to keep things in a proper place instead of taking so much extra trouble to hunt them up.

Bob thought occasionally of Pig Polly. He would have liked to visit her clean kitchen again for his own sake as well as her own. But Mr. Mayhew's prohibition to the boys and his own promise to help Mrs. Polly kept Bob away.

His mind, indeed, was full of another subject. As his third week at the farm slipped away, he could scarcely endure his impatience for a letter from his mother. The paper told him the steamer had arrived, and after that he studied the news diligently for the arrival of foreign mails. Even accounting for delays he had been sure the third week would bring him a letter—and now it was a month since his mother had sailed: could it be she was ill?

Even old Silas seemed to be sorry for him, for he only shook his head without meeting the boy's eye every morning when Bob put his eager question—"Wasn't there a letter for me, sir?" The only re-

laxation the old man allowed himself was his evening trip to the village, where he laid in his scanty supplies. Bob had written a request to the postmaster—at the old man's suggestion—that he should deliver any mail for Robert or William Boynton to Silas Mayhew. But the request brought no letters.

"I don't see why we don't hear from mother," he said wistfully one night, watching the dust settle in the evening sun behind old Major's heels.

Billy was lying on the grass. "You've got to hear some time, if you only wait long enough," he said easily. "Don't get in a stew. You know the steamer is in, and mother said they couldn't write regularly."

"It's time Mr. Dobbs sent us some money, too."

"What would you do with it? Feed it to the cows?"

"Well, I asked him, and I think he might send it. It makes you feel as if you were on a desert island when nobody writes to you. And Uncle Silas said we must pay some board: he may ask us for it any day."

"He didn't know how smart we were going to be," said lazy Billy. "If he were here now, he'd have us scratching gravel instead of just lying on our backs on the grass. Or else he'd have us building pig-pens.

He's bought three new pigs, did you know it? One of 'em's a funny little chap with a black nose."

"Pig Polly's got a funny one with a black nose too. I remember it because it ate so fast. Well, I'd just as soon build pig-pens if I only had a letter from mother."

"It'll come," began Billy, when a gruff voice behind them startled them both.

"Mayhew here?" it said.

"No," said Bob, sitting up suddenly.

The stranger came around and faced them. It was the surly blacksmith whom they had passed as they came into town more than a fortnight before. He still carried a frown on his dark brow. He was evidently a foreigner, for his vocabulary was small.

"Where?" he demanded.

"He's gone to the village," Billy said. "What do you want?"

"Money," answered the man. "Want money. Mayhew owe me. No trust Mayhew. Want money."

"All right," said Billy. "We can't give you any, because we haven't any, but I'll tell him when he comes home."

"Tell him," repeated the blacksmith. "Tell him.

"No trust. He pay or I no shoe horse. No trust Mayhew. Bad name."

"All right," said Billy again with a genial smile. "I'll tell him. Good-night."

"Good-night," was the gruff reply. No one could entirely ignore Billy's smile.

"He's enough to scare any one in the dark," Billy said as the stranger retreated down the road. "It makes a chap 'most afraid to turn his back to anywhere, when such thunder-clouds come up behind you so sudden like. Dass I lie down again?"

"I wonder if Uncle Silas is poor or only stingy," Bob said. "I saw him put a pretty good lot of money into his pocket yesterday. I should think he might pay to have his horses shod."

"Put his money into those new pigs, likely," yawned Billy. "I'm about ready to turn in. I don't believe we'll get any more adventures to-night."

But Billy was wrong. From somewhere in the near distance there fell on their ears a sound like that made by the rats in Hamelin. "It grew to a mighty rumbling" and both boys started to their feet.

"Crickets! Bob. What is coming?" exclaimed Billy.

"It sounds like a runaway circus," answered his brother. "Whatever it is, there it comes."

Down the hill, out of the wood-path came all at once a scrambling, squealing drove of pigs. And, in a moment, behind them through the dusk followed a small boy. The pigs scattered, and the boy, in pursuing part of them, ran straight into Bob and Billy.

Then he stopped short, while Billy, his blue eyes round with wonder, stared at him speechlessly. Then he found expression.

"Sandy!" he gasped.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE QUESTION OF THE PIGS

SANDY'S pale eyes were as round as Billy's, but he did not speak a word: he stood stock-still and stared. The pigs took advantage of his inattention and huddled into the barn-yard, where they peaceably began to root.

"Where did you come from?" asked Bobby.

Sandy shook himself awake.

"I ran away," he answered. "Billy told me to, and I did it. I caught rides on freight cars up here, but when I got here, I couldn't find you. I didn't know what man's house you were going to stay at and everybody I asked didn't know Billy Boynton."

"But what are you doing with all these pigs?" asked Billy.

Sandy settled down on the grass beside his friend. "They belong to a nice lady named Polly. I got sort of lost and then I found her house, and I was awful hungry and she gave me something to eat, and she'd fallen down and hurt her foot and her arm so she couldn't scarcely move, and it 'most killed her to get

out to feed the pigs and things, and she didn't have no one to help her, so I've stayed and helped her. But I ain't much good; I ain't big enough. Somebody's been stealing pigs lately; they've taken three, and this afternoon when I wasn't home, some one come and broke down the pig-pen and let all the pigs out."

"Who'd be so mean? asked Billy indignantly.

"She says she ain't got but one enemy and he's a man named Mayhew."

Billy whistled.

"But I told him she was hurt and he said he'd help her out," Bobby said.

"Maybe he thought he'd help the pigs out instead," laughed Biily. "But I didn't think he'd be so mean."

"Do you know him?"

"Just a little: we're living with him."

"Is he your uncle?'

"He seems to be," said Bob, shortly; he could not stand pity from Sandy.

"Do you suppose he really would let Pig Polly's pigs run away?" Billy asked.

"Polly said there wasn't anythin' he wouldn't do to spite her. But she didn't know if he'd dass steal her pigs."

Bob gave Billy a quick glance. Where had those

new pigs come from? and the little pig with the black nose? But Billy was slow to think evil. "Oh, no," he said easily, "he wouldn't do that, and I don't much believe he'd let her pigs out, though he can be pretty mean sometimes. How did you ever get up the pluck to run away, Sandy?"

"Why, Mr. Williams kept telling me he couldn't stand me any longer and he was going to send me back to the 'sylum. And I didn't want to go back there and I got sort of tired of having him stand me, and I kept thinking you told me why didn't I run away—and I did it. I just knew the name of the place you come to, so I hitched along and got here, and then I couldn't find you."

"You might have asked the postmaster," said Bob in his superior tone; it was rather comforting to have some one again with whom he might be lordly.

"I didn't think of that," Sandy answered humbly.

There was much to talk about, and the boys kept their tongues hard at work while the dusk dropped slowly over the landscape. From the road came the rattle of wagon-wheels, and Sandy realized that it was almost dark.

"I ought to be home," he said starting up, but Bob pushed him back.

"Keep still now," he said. "That's Uncle Silas. There's no need for him to see you; he'd ask a million questions. Just lie still where you are under that bush and he'll go right into the house, and then you can go home."

So Sandy obediently lay still while old Silas drove up to the barn and began to unharness his horse. His eye caught the new inhabitants of the barn-yard, and he went closer to examine them.

"Hello," he called. "Where did these pigs come from?"

"The whole drove came down the hill about half an hour ago, and went in there," Bob answered.

To Bob's great relief Mr. Mayhew asked no further questions. The boys heard him chuckle.

"Looks remarkable like Pig Polly's little drove. Wonder how they got out?" and he laughed again.

He led his horse into the barn, and presently reappeared with a big padlock. With this he carefully made fast the barn-yard gate.

"Now they're here," he said, "I'll keep 'em good and tight till I can send 'em to the pound. Folks ain't got a right to let their animals run loose like this."

Sandy started up in dismay, but Bob once more pushed him back.

"No letters?" he asked with an attempt at carelessness.

"Wouldn't I have given 'em to you if there had been?" said the old man roughly. "You'd better get to bed; you like bed well enough in the morning."

"All right," Billy answered.

They did not speak again. Bob watched the old man shuffle into the house. He lighted a candle in the kitchen and carried it over to the great dresser in the corner. Then he came over and pulled down the window shade. The light lingered a minute in the kitchen and then passed on into the old man's bedroom. If Bob had known what that light meant to him, he never would have lain so quietly under the lilac bush.

There came a little sniffle from Sandy.

"Whatever will I do about them pigs?" he whimpered.

"You'll have to leave them," Bob said. "They'll be all right there to-night; any way you can't get them out. We'll manage it to-morrow. Only you keep out of sight; if Uncle Silas knows there's another, it will only make more trouble."

"Good-night," said Billy. "It isn't far for you now, but you'd better go before it's any darker. Tell

Mrs. Polly we'll get her pigs home for her to-morrow somehow."

"How can you?" asked doubting Sandy.

"We'll find a way," Bob said. "I promise you we'll get the pigs home safe."

So Sandy, somewhat comforted, wiped his eyes. The boys ran with him as far as the brook and left him under the shelter of Pig Polly's light.

There was nothing said about the pigs the next morning. They squealed in a homesick fashion, but Mr. Mayhew went calmly about his work and ignored them. At noontime Bob decided something must be done.

"If those are Pig Polly's pigs, shan't we take them home?" he asked. "She may be worrying about them."

"You leave them pigs alone," Mr. Mayhew answered sharply. "They're no concern of yours. If she wants her pigs let her keep 'em at home."

"It wasn't her fault," said Billy. "Some one broke down her pen and let them out."

"How do you know that? Have you been over there?"

"No," said Billy. He knew Bob was frowning at him, but he did not know how to evade Mr. Mayhew's questions.

"How do you know anything about the pens then?"

"Somebody told me."

"Who told you? What are you so slow about?"

"It was just a boy that came along," broke in Bob. "He'd been at Pig Polly's to help her."

The old man looked suspiciously from one boy to the other.

"Don't you go there; that's all," he said, and turned toward the house.

At dinner time, Mr. Mayhew was as genial as he knew how to be. Billy responded with his usual good-nature. Bob was silent. He was wondering how he could make good his promise to Sandy. It must be done, but the matter did not look hopeful.

After dinner was over, Mr. Mayhew sat still a moment as if he were thinking. Then he turned to Billy with what was meant for a jovial smile.

"I guess I'll have to give you boys a vacation this afternoon," he said, "and let you drive them pigs to the pound; it ain't far."

For once Billy did not wait for Bob to speak first.

"Drive Pig Polly's pigs to the pound?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," mimicked the old man; "drive Pig Polly's pigs to the pound."

For an instant there was silence. Then Billy pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

"I won't do it," he said quietly.

## CHAPTER IX

### BOBBY TRIES TO ANSWER THE QUESTION

Bob held his breath at his brother's daring, but Billy looked cool and unconcerned. He did not mean to be impertinent, but he knew that nothing would induce him to put Pig Polly to so much trouble. She had been good to Sandy and was therefore Billy's friend.

Silas looked at the boy in amazement.

"You won't, won't you?" he asked.

"No, sir," answered Billy gravely.

"And why not, I'd like to know?"

"Because it wasn't Mrs. Polly's fault that her pigs got lost, and it would be mean to put them in the pound. I wish you'd let us take them home."

"Well, I won't," snapped Mr. Mayhew. "You seem to suit yourself, and I'll suit myself,"—and then he left the room.

"Now you've done it," said Bob. "You've made him mad and there's no telling what he'll do."

"I can't help it," said Billy. "We couldn't take them to the pound, but I don't know how we're going

to get them home. You'll have to make up something, Bobs."

"Whatever we do, Mr. Mayhew will get even with us some way," answered Bob gloomily.

But the old man did nothing very fierce just then. He harnessed Major to the jolting old wagon and presently the boys heard the wheels rattling down the road.

"He's gone off, and hasn't even left us any work to do," said Bob. "He must be pretty mad. He never did that before in the daytime."

"I know one piece of work I'm going to do right away," Billy answered. "I'm going to find some dinner for those pigs, for I'm tired of hearing them squeal."

The pigs did not get an overflowing meal, but they received it gratefully. Billy leaned over the bars and looked down upon the beasts as they struggled and snorted.

"See," he said, turning to Bob. "Every pig has a cross on it; it must be Mrs. Polly's trademark."

"Sure enough," answered Bobby. "I didn't notice that before." Then he straightened himself suddenly. "Billy, that same mark is on those three new pigs."

"Is it, really?'

Bobby hid his face on his arms, which were crossed on the top rail of the fence. "Think of having an uncle who is a thief," he groaned.

"You don't know he took them," answered Billy. "There's Sandy. Come on, Sandy; no one's here."

Sandy came cautiously down the slope and joined the boys at the barn-yard. "Pig Polly's terribly put out," he said. "What's the matter of Bob?"

"He's put out too. Is Pig Polly scared about her pigs?"

"Yes, she's afraid she won't never get them back. She's terrible afraid of your boss and she can't walk a step hardly yet. She's been thinkin' and thinkin' what to do and she can't think of nothin'."

Bobby raised his head.

"Come and see these pigs," he said curtly, and led the way to the pig-pen. "Are those pigs yours?"

"Sure they are," cried Sandy excitedly. "They're the ones that were stole. I know that little feller with the black nose, and, look, there's the cross."

"Maybe Uncle Silas bought them," suggested Billy.

"She wouldn't sell nothin' to your boss," said Sandy scornfully, "and I know that black nosed one was stole."

Bobby turned away and threw himself on the grass.

Billy and Sandy waited for him to speak. There was silence for many minutes and then Bob faced his audience.

"I know what I'm going to do," he said slowly. "I'm going to put Dobbin into the other wagon and I'm going to find the sheriff. It's a disgrace to have to tell a strange sheriff you are afraid that you have a stealing uncle, but it's more of a disgrace just to let him steal and not do anything. We promised Pig Polly sure we'd get those pigs home to-night and we can't do it ourselves."

"Oh, Bobs, what a lot of bother," said Billy. "You don't know he stole the pigs, and most likely he'll let us take the others home to-night."

Bob's purpose was always made stronger by opposition.

"Most likely he won't," he answered stubbornly. "And we've promised; we've got to do everything we can to keep our promise."

"Suppose he arrests him."

Bob hesitated.

"We'll ask him not to do that; just make him send the pigs back. It was you that wouldn't drive the pigs to the pound; I should think you'd want to help now."

"But saying you won't do things isn't half as much

trouble as getting to work to do them," answered the easy-going Billy, with his cheerful smile. "But of course we'll go along, Bobs, if you do go. Come on, Sandy, and help me harness."

Bob ran out the wagon and began to examine the wheels. Sandy followed Billy into the stable.

"Put the harness on old Dob and I'll help Bobs oil the wheels," Billy said.

Sandy looked aghast.

"Oh, Billy, I can't. I dasent touch a horse. I'm scared."

"Oh, come on," said Billy good-naturedly. "A boy can't be a 'fraidcat. I'll show you how."

So Sandy, shrinking and pale, had his lesson; he could refuse Billy nothing. He even climbed upon the manger and, after many attempts forced the bit between old Dobbin's teeth. Billy was a good teacher, and, before the lesson was over, Sandy knew the use of each strap and buckle. But when Dobbin was finally between the shafts, Sandy stepped back with a long sigh.

"Nothin' 'll ever make me do that again," he said solemnly; "he's too awful big."

But he did not know then how soon he was to put his lesson to use.

The boys climbed into the wagon and Dobbin took them slowly out of the yard. It was their first expedition away from the house since their arrival, and, in spite of its serious nature, it brought a feeling of freedom and pleasure. Dobbin's broad back jogged quietly ahead over the dusty road that went curling away through the grain-fields. They went through a shady bit of woods and across a little stream where Dobbin's big feet pounded heavily across the bridge and frightened away all the little fishes playing beneath in the shadow. Then the wagon drew near the blacksmith's shop. It had passed no house before.

"Fortunately our friend isn't out here, or he might arrest us for debt," said Billy.

"Maybe that's his wife," said Bob. "I'll ask her the way. Am I right for the sheriff's?" called out Bob without checking his horse.

The woman looked at him for a moment as if she had not understood. But she knew how to speak English. She answered dully:

"If it's Tim Johnson you want, keep around to your left: you'll get there some time."

"Thank you," answered Bobby, politely.

"'Beneath the spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands,'"

quoted Billy. "Only there's no tree, and he was too—too—peculiar to have poetry written about him, and it's only his wife anyway. Sandy, I dare you to crawl out on the shafts and ride on Dobbin's back."

"Oh, I dasent," answered the timid Sandy.

"It's just as easy as riding in the wagon," and, in a minute, Billy was astride the old horse, forcing him into a most unbecoming gallop.

"He goes just like a sewing-machine," Billy called back. "Want to try it, Sandy?"

But Sandy clung to his seat, his emotions a mixture of terror and excitement. His pale cheeks were flushed, and he was shouting with laughter over Billy's antics, but, at the same time, he was sure they would all be dumped into the ditch.

Finally Bob pulled up his horse short.

"Come on back here, Billy," he said. "We're coming to some houses and we don't want to be taken for a circus."

Sandy gave a long sigh of content and admiration as his friend settled in beside him once more.

"You're so terrible brave, Billy. I wish I was brave and dass do things."

"You're only a little chap yet," Bob said, kindly

enough. But there was in the words a patronizing tone which silenced Sandy completely.

"Look," burst out Billy. "Isn't that a house? Wouldn't you like to get inside it? It looks big enough and kind enough to cover a whole army. Let me ask about the sheriff here, Bobs."

But Bob only whipped up his horse.

"I'm not going to stop at a place like that; I feel too much like beggars anyway. I'll ask somebody on the road."

"Oh, but Bob, there was such a nice woman with white hair on the porch. She looked awfully kind. I wanted to talk to her. Maybe she wouldn't care to talk to me, though," he added more thoughtfully than usual. He looked down at his grimy hands and stretched out one unpolished shoe. He was silent for an instant while he wondered if even his mother would like to talk to him in his present state.

But Billy could not keep quiet long. He turned to look back at the big, comfortable old farmhouse with its gambrel roof. The house stood on well-kept turf: on the south side bloomed a gay flower-garden: off to the other side stood the neat barns and sheds, while the cultivated fields rolled away in every direction. The whole farm spoke thrift and comfort and refinement.

"If we were really beggars," said Billy, "that's where I'd stop for cold victuals. It looks as if they'd give you hot victuals and plenty of it. I 'most wish I'd tried."

For another second Billy was silent. The thought of a comfortable meal brought back a vision of their own home; he saw his father and mother, himself and Bobby sitting around the dinner-table with its soft lights, its white linen, its bright silver. Involuntarily he put his dirty hands out of sight behind his back. For the first time in his life he was thoroughly ashamed of them.

He turned his attention back to his brother.

"Well then, Bobs, if you won't let me ask the rich and great, will you ask the very next chap we meet, whoever it is?"

"Yes," said Bobby.

The next chap proved to be half a mile further on: he was a boy of about their own age who was lying on the grass under a tree.

Bobby pulled up.

"Can you tell me where Tim Johnson lives?"

"Yep," answered the boy with a steady stare.

"Where?"

"Where did you come from?"

"From home," answered Bobby, shortly. "Where does Tim Johnson live?"

"Where do you live? I never saw you before."

"That doesn't matter. I want to know where Tim Johnson lives."

"We're living with Mr. Mayhew," Billy broke in. "Now tell us where Timothy lives."

"Mr. Silas Mayhew?" asked the boy.

"Yes, yes," answered Bob, impatiently. "Will you tell me, or won't you, where the sheriff lives?"

The boy rolled over on his elbows. "Oh, go on," he said. "I won't tell you anything. You're not telling the truth. I've been there, and you ain't living there at all."

Bob started Dobbin.

"You haven't found out," interrupted Billy.

"And I won't from him; he's just guying us."

"This drive makes me think of some poetry I learned once," said Billy; "the first line was,

"'Go on, go on, go on, go on,'

and when it got to the last line it was still 'going on.'"

"It's getting sort of late," put in Sandy, anxiously.

Bobby neither laughed at Billy nor answered Sandy; he had gone off into a brown study. He let Billy stop Dobbin at the next house and inquire for Mr.

Timothy Johnson: his home was not much further to seek, but, when it was reached, its owner was not there: he was away from home for a couple of days.

"We haven't got much out of this ride but fun," Billy said as he climbed into the wagon again and Bob turned toward home. "Maybe we won't even think it's so much fun when Uncle Silas hears about it. I'm sort of glad, though, we didn't find the sheriff. If you've got queer relations, you might as well keep them to yourself; isn't that so, Bobs?"

"I suppose so," Bob answered absently.

Billy chattered, and Sandy laughed all the way home, but Bob did neither.

"What are you mooning about?" Billy asked at last.

Bob started; his shoulders were straight and his eyes bright.

"I'll tell you what I'm thinking about," he said. "That fellow back there said we didn't live with Mr. Mayhew. He was just fooling, of course, but I've been thinking how grand it would be if we'd made a mistake. No one's told us his name, and suppose Mr. Mayhew—I mean the man we live with, shouldn't be Mr. Silas Mayhew at all?"

Billy looked startled for a moment, but then he shook his head with a laugh.

"Come down, Bobs," he said. "You aren't living in a fairy-book, and you can't have godmothers with wands to turn people into somebody else. The man who mended your wheel told you it was Uncle Silas lived there."

"And Pig Polly calls your boss old Silas Mayhew," Sandy ventured. "I'll ask her some more about it to-night."

Bob looked rather dashed by these proofs, but he would not give in so easily.

"I know what I'm going to do anyhow. I'm going to ask the blacksmith."

The woman was still sitting outside the door, but she did not look as though she had the slightest recollection of the boys.

"Can you tell me who lives in the next house up the road?" Bob asked.

"The next house up the road?" she repeated stupidly. "Do you mean old Sile Mayhew's?"

Bob's heart sank. "Yes, I guess so. I mean the white house on the other side of the road about half a mile from here."

"There ain't no one but Mayhew lived there as long as I've known the place," the woman answered.

## CHAPTER X

### PIG POLLY INTERFERES

BOBBY flapped the reins and Dobbin moved slowly on again. The moment's hope was over; there was to be no change; they were going back to the same old drudgery, to the scanty, uninviting supper, and to the home in which Bob was so unhappy. That instant's gleam of possible brightness made the gloom even darker. The boy did not know how much longer he could stand this life. Should he follow Sandy's example and run away?

All the boys were quieter after they left the blacksmith. Even to Billy, the afternoon's freedom made the monotony of farm work show in less pleasant colors. And he had not yet forgotten his vision of supper in the big farmhouse.

"You'd better get out here, Sandy," he said. "Over that field is your shortest way home, and there's no use in your coming to our house. Uncle Silas may be back."

Uncle Silas was back, and he was in a white heat of excitement. He came hobbling out to the barn at once.

"Where on earth have you boys been to?" he demanded. "Don't you know I could have you arrested for going off with my horse and wagon?"

Billy's laugh bubbled over; it struck him as funny that Uncle Silas too, should be thinking of the law.

"The sheriff isn't home," he said good-naturedly.

Uncle Silas stopped short.

"What do you know about the sheriff?"

"That's where we've been," said Billy, not seeing Bob's frown.

"What for?"

"We were going to get him to make you give back Mrs. Polly's pigs. She wants them, and we got tired of hearing them squeal."

Uncle Silas looked from one boy to the other, but words seemed to fail him.

"Whatever put you up to that?" he asked at length.

"We couldn't make you, and we wanted somebody to. Besides, I guess we wanted a ride," answered honest Billy.

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. He wasn't home."

"Well! Of all things!"

The old man stood thinking a moment. Then he turned toward the house.

"I thought mebbe you'd gone for good," he said.

"I wish we had," murmured Bob.

Mr. Mayhew's ears were quick at times. He turned again.

"I'll take good care you don't," he said. "I know which of you two cooked up this job."

In a few moments he was back again; he had a small key in his hand.

"If you're so anxious about your neighbor's property," he said as he fumbled over the padlock on the barn-yard gate, "you can take 'em home to her and tell her I hope they enjoyed their visit and mebbe next time she won't be so stingy of her oil-can."

"Shall we take the three out of the other pen, too?" Billy asked.

"You needn't take my pigs."

"There are three there with Mrs. Polly's mark," said Bob.

"Her mark? What do you mean?"

"All her pigs are marked with a cross."

The old man stooped to examine the pigs before him; then he went around to his own pen. Presently the door of the pen opened and three more perplexed little pigs joined the drove in the barn-yard.

"If you'd use your eyes as careful for your work

you'd get on better," Mr. Mayhew said, as he passed Bob. "Now if you're goin' to drive them pigs home, you'd better be spry about it; it's after sundown now."

"I'm awful hungry, aren't you, Bobs?" Billy asked as the old man left them.

"Yes, but we'd better take the pigs right away or he may change his mind. I'm glad it's come out this way, for we had to keep our promise and I didn't know how we were going to do it."

"You'd have found some way," said Billy, firm in his knowledge that it would take some large obstacle to make Bob break his word. "I hope the beasts aren't going to be cranky."

But the pigs seemed to have but one mind among them, and that was to get away from Mr. Mayhew and back to Pig Polly as fast as possible. They galloped up the hill, each one seeking to be first. The boys had to run to keep up with them.

Neither spoke at first, but as they struck the edge of the woods, Bob blurted out, "I've had enough of this kind of life."

"I can't be crazy about it myself," said Billy, still under the influence of the afternoon. "But almost four weeks of it are gone."

"I never can stand four more weeks of it. Billy, why don't we go home?"

"Why, because mother told us to stay here."

"But she didn't know how bad the old man is. She *couldn't* expect us to stand all this, Billy!"

"Well," answered Billy, slowly, "perhaps not. But you can't tell. Maybe she and father wanted us to rough it a bit. And I kind of hate to give in, somehow. You know how father always talks about the 'Boynton pluck.' I wouldn't like to have him think we were quitters, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," assented Bob, quickly.

"Besides," added Billy, "you couldn't get home anyhow: you haven't any money."

It was growing dusk in the woods, and Bob was too much absorbed in his thoughts to be careful of his steps. His foot caught a projecting root and he fell headlong.

"Hurt yourself?" asked Billy, stopping short.

"Jiminy, yes. I 'most pulled my foot off. I'll be all right in a minute, though. Go on after the pigs or they'll get away from you. Go on and tell Mrs. Polly about them and I'll come in a minute; it's straight along the path."

Billy obeyed as usual. He followed his convoy and

left Bob sitting on the ground clasping his twisted ankle.

It was very quiet in the woods after Billy and the pigs had scampered out of hearing. Bob crawled over to a soft spot under the bushes and lay down flat. There was no sound anywhere and Bob began to feel very lonely.

Suddenly, close at hand, a screech-owl gave its unearthly cry. The boy started up, his heart beating wildly. He knew in an instant what it was, but the shriek made the wood seem bigger and more awful. And as he sat there in the dim shadow, he heard another sound, the snapping of a twig under some one's foot. Bobby drew back closer to the big tree which sheltered him: it seemed his only friend.

Some one was coming down the path. In another moment Bobby caught sight of him.

Even in the darkness the boy recognized Mr. Mayhew. Bob himself was well hidden by the shadows of the under-brush. Almost opposite him, the old man stopped and stepped off the path on the other side. He took two or three steps into the woods, and then, kneeling down, began to scrape out the leaves and dirt from under a big stump.

He lifted a flat stone and took a box from a cavity

beneath. He untied the box; he took something out of his pocket, something that was stiff and that crackled. Bobby could not see what it was, but he saw it go into some sort of a package and the package into the box, and the box back into its hiding-place. Mr. Mayhew put back the stone and brushed back the earth and leaves. Then he rose stiffly.

He went down the path toward home, not even glancing around as he went, quite unconscious that, out of that silent strip of woods, he had chosen the one place where a pair of human eyes could watch him.

Bobby's heart was still beating hard, but this time with excitement instead of fear. He forgot his pain.

So here was a new hiding-place! and which one of the boys' possessions was the old man putting out of sight? Fairly tingling, Bob knelt before the old stump and began to dig the earth from under its roots. He reached the stone, lifted it off, and found beneath it a little space carefully walled up; on the bottom lay a tin box.

With shaking hands, Bob untied the string and opened the cover. There was but one thing inside, a worn old pocketbook which Bob had never seen before.

"It isn't anything of ours, after all," he said.

But he opened it. Inside, there were in different compartments rolls of bills. They were all old notes except one lot of three fresh, stiff five dollar bills, folded together: there was just light enough to show their value.

"That was what he was putting in," thought Bob. "I don't care so long as it isn't ours, but if it had been I'd have taken it. I wish it was, and I wouldn't be long getting home, but as it isn't, he can keep his bank where he wants to."

He replaced the leaves and earth over the stone, and then started to follow Billy. The pain was almost gone from his foot, but he was conscious of a great hunger.

"I don't suppose we'll get any supper to-night," he thought as he crossed the brook. He was not half an hour behind his brother, but the pigs had been safely penned and were rejoicing in home and supper. Pig Polly's door stood open: on the threshold stood Billy peering into the darkness. And behind Billy was a sight that took the last pain out of Bob's ankle and sent him up the path as swift as an arrow; it was a clean, white table set for three, and covered with more eatables than Bob had ever before in his life seen

grouped on one table. Through the open door came the odor of fresh coffee.

"There you are," shouted Billy. "We've just finished with the pigs and I was coming after you. Hurry up. You ought to see Mrs. Polly's tea-party."

"I smell it," said Bob. The fragrance of the coffee covered all his woes for the present. He forgot to be silent and careworn: he flushed and dimpled and made his manners to Mrs. Polly till that lady could not tell which boy she liked better. The boys ate and joked and Bob's laugh was as free as any of the trio; he was once more the Bob who had been leader in many an adventure in the good old days.

Pig Polly said little. She watched the boys in a thoughtful way, and plied them with food until every empty corner was completely filled.

"You've done me another good turn," she said abruptly to Bob at last, "and I wasn't over-polite to you about the oil, either. Why did ye?"

"Why, the pigs were yours," said Bob.

"And you're gentlemen," she answered. "What made ye ask Sandy there whether that was Mr. Mayhew's house ye're livin' in?"

"I didn't ask Sandy," said Bob, flushing. "I asked

the blacksmith's wife, and I asked her because I wanted some wild excuse to get away."

"Have to be pretty wild I guess," Mrs. Polly said drily. "How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks."

"Why did you come?"

"Mother and father were going abroad and Uncle Silas offered to take care of us while they were gone."

"Did they bring you?"

"No," answered Bob, still politely, though he was growing tired of Polly's catechism. "Mother wrote to him, and he said to come when we got ready, so we waited till she went and then we came."

"We came on our wheels," added Billy, "and we had a big time. We landed first way on the other side of the mountain, and had to come across; it was a good short cut because the path comes out close to his house. So we were right there when we got there."

Pig Polly grunted. Her curiosity was apparently satisfied. She stopped asking questions and stuffed the boys' pockets full of cookies.

"I guess I can feed three boys," she said. "You come here when Silas Mayhew starves you. This

chap I'm going to keep all the time if I can get it settled."

Sandy's little face beamed, but he looked anxiously at Billy.

"Oh, my father'll settle it all right," said Billy. "He told me he would. And, Sandy, maybe you can earn some money here to help pay for Mr. Williams's cow. I guess we can get enough, for my father said I could have some money this summer and Mr. Dobbs hasn't sent us any, and I'll give you all I haven't spent."

"You'd better go now," said their hostess. "Better not get his ill-will. He don't treat you bad, does he?"

"Oh, no," Billy said. "But he doesn't feed us as you do. Good-night."

"We're ever so much obliged," said Bob. "Good-night."

Pig Polly and Sandy had a long conversation as they washed the dishes. After Sandy had gone to bed Polly sat in her armchair, deeply thinking.

"I'm afeared on him," she said, "and those boys is really nothing to me. If he stole my pigs because I wouldn't give him any oil, what would he do if he knew I done this?"

But presently she shook her head.

"I'm ashamed of you, you Pig Polly, you," she said aloud. "They didn't stop to think what you was to them before they brought your pigs back. And they're gentlemen, sure enough. And they're friends of this little Sandy boy, and he's begun to pull my heart-strings already. I'll do it."

She limped over to the table and sought out her ink bottle.

"I'll do it," she repeated, "and I'll risk old Silas finding out it was me who done it."

Painfully the letter was written and addressed.

"Well, I've written to him. I know he's Justice of the Peace, or something like that. Sandy shall post that in the morning."

So Pig Polly also went to bed, leaving on the table her letter addressed to Billy's friend, the master of Black Romeo.

## CHAPTER XI

### BOB MAKES A DISCOVERY

THE next morning was a deviation from the usual routine. Major had lost a shoe and Billy was sent with him to the blacksmith's.

"Oh, I forgot," said Billy. "He was here the other night and said you owed him some money, and he wouldn't do any more work till you paid him."

Mr. Mayhew scowled.

"He was here, was he? Well he might as well stay at home. It's all right. He was down to the store last night and I paid him. Here's your money now for this shoe. See that you don't lose it, and don't you waste no time talkin' to this Pollak. You get your horse shod and come right home."

"All right," said Billy, swinging himself upon Major's back.

The blacksmith was not quite so black this morning as he had been on the evening of his call. He nodded with a certain good-humor to Billy.

"Old Mayhew pay," he said, showing his white teeth. "Got money now, eh?"

"Yes, the money's all right. Can I help any way?"

The blacksmith handed the boy a feather-duster.

"You keep flies. Bad horse: cross like old man. You work for old man, eh?"

"Yes," said Billy.

The man shook his head as he took Major's foot between his knees.

"No trust him. Bad man."

Billy brushed and the Pole tapped with his hammer until Major again walked on four new shoes. Then Billy took out of his pocket the little handful of coin which Mr. Mayhew had carefully counted out.

"Just right?" the blacksmith asked. "He cheat if he can."

A dried-up little farmer was waiting his turn. He chuckled at the smith's words.

"He'd get the best of an oyster if he could. He treated me and another man to soda last night and it knocked me flat, I can tell you. I never knew him to do no such thing before. He was up to some trick, that's sure, but he said 'twas for good luck; that he'd got a bad debt and could afford to stand treat."

"Is the money all right?" asked Billy.

The Pole was counting it over slowly. Suddenly he, too, chuckled, and held up a mutilated dime.

"I knew he'd do you if he could," said the farmer. "I know that punched dime; he offered it for the soda last night and Maloney wouldn't take it. Old Mayhew got red mad and said he'd get even with the man who'd given it to him, and he said he'd got it at the post-office, and he'd take it back. But I asked him if 'twas the post-office paid him his bad debt, and that seemed to shut him up pretty quick. So he's worked off the dime on you. He's a sly one."

"Bad man," scowled the blacksmith, and then he, too, seemed to find the affair funny. With a short laugh, he tossed the coin to Billy.

"I pay wages. You dust flies; I give bad dime. Tell Mayhew."

"You'd better not tell him," said the farmer. "You hold on to it."

"Did I earn it?" asked Billy.

The farmer laughed again.

"Did you earn a bad dime? Well, I guess so. The Pollak pays good wages, you see, and a bad dime is more than you'll get out of old Mayhew for your whole summer's work. If I was you I'd look out for a new boss, son."

Billy mounted his horse and ambled home.

"'Seems to me you was gone a powerful long time,"

grumbled Mr. Mayhew. "I thought mebbe you'd run away."

"I wouldn't run very far nor fast on Major," laughed Billy. "I'd rather chance Dobbin if I could choose; and I'd rather have my wheel than either. But you didn't think I'd run away and leave Bob behind, did you?"

The old man looked slowly from one boy to the other.

"I don't know as I reckoned on that; so you two always hunts in pairs, eh? Well, I'll say that if one of you goes, I'd rather 'twould be him than you."

Bob heard and turned away. He disliked Mr. Mayhew and could not wholly conceal it, but that did not make it any easier to meet the old man's openly expressed contempt. Everything that was at all pleasant was for Billy; for him, although he did his best at the distasteful work, there was nothing but grumbling.

There was onion weeding as an amusement for the afternoon. Even Billy could not find it very pleasant to crawl on his knees up and down between long lines of onions while the sun beat on the back of his neck. Billy had another annoyance, too, before the day was over. He had been trying of late to put his things in

their proper places so that Uncle Silas should not hide them away. But he found that, even so, they were not safe, and this went against his sense of fairness. To-day he had made a discovery which he was waiting for a chance to share with his brother.

"I guess you're right, captain, after all," he said when the boys were in their room. "The old man has quite a considerable number of queer points about him. In fact he's the pointedest man I ever knew. Old Mr. Williams is queer, but he's a good man all the same, and somehow I'm not sure this one is. I don't believe even mother can remember how awful queer he is."

"I guess she must have forgotten, or I don't believe she'd have sent us here," said Bob gloomily. "I've had farming enough to last me all the rest of my life."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that if it wasn't for the queerness. I don't know as you quite know how queer he is, Bobs."

"I know all I want to. What are you driving at?"

"Try to look at the bright side," said Billy cheerfully. "It isn't as bad as if it was twice as bad. Come, 'wrap the drapery of your couch around you, and lie down to pleasant dreams.'"

He skilfully twisted his brother in the sheet and tripped him up; he knew a wrestling-match always restored Bob's spirits.

When they had to stop for breath, Billy perched on the side of the bed.

"Do you feel moderately good-natured now, Bobs? for I've got something I'm trying to break to you gently. I'd be a little mad myself if I didn't know you could do it up for the whole company."

"I knew you were at some monkey-shine. Fire it out."

"His noble heart was rent in twain," murmured Billy.

Bob, from his seat on the floor, made a threatening movement.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Yes, yes, captain. Brace up. The old man has locked up our wheels."

"Where?" asked Bob, coming to his feet.

"I knew you'd be mad. In the new shed—he calls it that—the one back of the barn without any windows in it."

"How do you know they're there, then?"

"I thought he was only moving them out of the barn to make room to thrash. I saw him put them

in that shed, and lock the door, and when I asked for the key, he only laughed that gummy laugh and said they'd be safe for awhile. Maybe he's mad about the sheriff."

"I'll find the key," said Bob. "What kind of a one was it?"

"Oh, it was that big queer shaped one that has been lying around the kitchen."

"Yes, I know it; and I'll find it if I have to hunt the farm. He has no right to take our things like that. I'm sure we don't shirk. I never worked so hard in my life before. It's stealing to take our things, and we've a right to get them back. I wonder how much more of this we've got to stand?"

Bob blew out the candle and went wrathfully to bed, not knowing that the answer to his question lay in the note which Pig Polly had written to the great man, and which he had tucked absently into his pocket and never read.

The next day went badly. Bob asked for his wheel and was refused. He worked sullenly all day and Mr. Mayhew was openly disagreeable to him. Bob's determination grew.

At supper time the boys were glum, but the old man was suave. He treated them to fried hominy

and molasses, and did all in his power to make himself agreeable. The reason presently appeared.

"There's a cattle-show over to Carter's to-morrer and next day," he said carelessly, "and I'm thinkin' some of sendin' over them four Holstein heifers. There ain't none finer in the county, I don't believe. It ain't over ten miles to Carter's. A smart boy could drive the cattle over in a mornin' easy. Do you expect you could do it, Billy?"

"And Bob too?"

Mr. Mayhew frowned and shook his head. "No, I can't spare you both. There's too much weedin' to be done. You manage the critters best: it wouldn't be no trouble for you."

Billy straightened himself involuntarily. He was so unused to being put ahead of Bob that the sudden growth to his self-respect restored his interest in the farm and quite covered his displeasure. He was ready to drive a dozen cows if necessary. He had never before done anything entirely alone; he had always had Bob's support and advice—a good deal of the latter;—now, the thought of his own importance and freedom made the expedition look delightful.

Bob was silent. He had had nothing to quiet his

anger, or make life appear more pleasant to him. When the old man started up the road, Bob, instead of following Billy to bed as usual, turned back into the house, sore and determined. "I'll find the key of that shed if I have to hunt all night," he said to himself.

He knew most of the hiding-places by this time, and went through them methodically. He found some lost treasures, but not the key.

The kitchen dresser was his last resource in the house. He looked in vain over the lower shelves and then dragged up a chair to help in his higher explorations.

That too, seemed in vain. He could see the shelf, and no key was visible: neither was it in any dish. He was about to own himself beaten when his attention was caught by a scrap of something white far back on the broad shelf. His arm was long, and by standing on tiptoe, he could reach the bit of paper. As he pulled it from the crack, he found it was not so small: it was an envelope, much crumpled, and it had been opened. It was addressed to himself, so Bob pulled out the enclosure. That was only a short statement from Mr. Dobbs written to accompany a post-office order for twenty dollars. The order was

not there. Bob's eyes grew very wide as he thrust the envelope into his pocket. He did not stop to consider what it meant, but returned to the crack at the back of the shelf where it rested on the supporting bracket. He ran his fingers along the crevice and gave a little cry of triumph as they struck the big key. Then he felt more paper, thin paper this time that crackled at his touch. Bob pulled it out, and stood for a moment, perfectly still, looking at what he held in his hand. He had found his mother's letters.

## CHAPTER XII

### BILLY GOES TO THE FAIR

Bob's face grew white with anger as he realized what had happened. His letters had been stolen and hidden from him, while he was longing for them and wondering over his mother's silence. What reason could there be for such a thing? What reason except to spite him and make him miserable! Why should Uncle Silas hate him so?

He went slowly up-stairs with the letters and the key in his hand. This had brought things to a climax. His mother had sent him to live here, and he had endured all the disagreeable things for her sake. He had stood a good deal, but he could stand no more. Even to please his mother he could stay no longer under this roof.

He sat down in the dark on the top stair to think matters over. He would have waked up Billy and left the house then and there, except for his knowledge that the Seven Wise Men of Greece with Hercules to aid them could not argue Billy awake and get him dressed after he had once closed his eyes

for the night. There was nothing to be done till morning; and even then Billy was sure to be a stumbling-block. He was in a good temper now with Uncle Silas and with the farm; and it was always, in any case, so much easier to keep Billy doing what he was doing than to start him at a new action. He followed easily enough unless the leader turned sharply on his own steps. Then the law of inertia kept Billy going forward.

Uncle Silas was not going to be of any help. He found the boys too useful to be willing to have them leave. He would wheedle Billy and make him want to stay. With Uncle Silas's persuasions and the force of habit on one side, against Bob's arguments and the necessity of taking decided action;—the result was doubtful.

Well then, Uncle Silas must not come into the matter. He should not know they meant to go. He had not been so good to them that they wished to take an affectionate leave of him. It might be a little sneaky to run away, but it must be done.

And then there was another good point. Billy was going over to Carter's with the heifers and would be out of the way. If he could be made vexed enough in the morning to say he would go to Carter's and

not come back, matters would be very simple. He need only wait there for Bob to join him; and Billy was good at waiting. There would be no possible chance then for his ardor to cool nor for Uncle Silas to talk him over. Bob could manage the rest of the affair himself.

With Billy despatched before Mr. Mayhew suspected anything, then could Bob afford to defy him, reclaim his wheel and depart openly? He might if he had only his own to consider, but he must carry off Billy's bicycle, too. Billy could not drive cows on a bicycle, but he must have it later, if the boys were going home. No: it must still be a runaway. With one wheel to manage Bob might do as he pleased, but with two, opposition could hinder him sadly. Clearly Uncle Silas must know nothing of their plans until they were all accomplished.

Then another thought came into Bob's mind. That money under the stump: those three clean bills! He had heard the paper crackle, and he knew those bills were what Mr. Mayhew had taken out of his pocket. The money-order which had disappeared was for twenty dollars. Without doubt, those three five dollar bills belonged to him and Billy. The other five dollars were unaccounted for. Had the old man stolen

them or was it merely his passion for hiding things? Bob did not know of the farmer's story of the bad dime. He set his teeth hard when he thought of his precious letters. To steal those was, in Bob's eyes, a greater crime than to take the money. But the money was his; would it be right for him to take it for their journey? He could come to no definite conclusion about anything in the troubled state of his mind. He heard Mr. Mayhew come in, and, slipping into his own room, Bob undressed without a light and crept into bed beside Billy to toss and dream and awake a dozen times before the morning dawned and it was really time to start the new day.

Then, still hot with wrath, he poured out his tale. Billy listened with open eyes.

"But that's stealing," he said. "I didn't think he'd steal."

"Remember the pigs," said Bobby.

"Maybe," Billy admitted slowly, "and then he was scared to take that dime back to the post-office."

"That's the other five dollars," Bob said when he heard this new story. "Keep the dime, Billy; it might be proof some time. Robbing the mail means something pretty serious. But we can't do anything now but get out."

"Won't mother think we're soft if we can't stand it? She sent us here."

"That's the only reason I've stayed till now. But it couldn't have been as bad as this when mother was here. He's the meanest man I ever came across. He gets all the work of slaves out of us and steals our things and then makes us feel he's keeping us from pure charity."

"Father'll be sure to call us muffs and wish he had brought us some doll-babies from Paris," said Billy with a grin. "I guess he'll rub it into us about the Boynton pluck. But I'll follow all right. Where's my letter?"

"I'll give it to you in a minute. It's over there with that shed key. But listen to me first. There's no use talking about it; we've had enough and we've got to leave. You've got to drive those old 'cwows' over to Carter's, fortunately, and you'll get there by noon. Then you just wait. After dinner, that'll be half past twelve, the old man is going down to see how the potatoes are getting on, and I'll have a chance. I'll get the wheels and I can do ten miles in two hours anyhow. I'll be over at Carter's at three at the very latest. I can get that money too if I have to. Then I'll write a letter to say we've gone, and

we'll send a man back with the heifers and the letter and he can bring away our trunk. I'd tell him fair and square I was going, only if he should turn nasty I couldn't get your wheel too."

"Come, come, boys," called Mr. Mayhew's voice up the stairs, "don't be all day gettin' started."

"Remember," said Bob. "Don't open your head. And wait for me at Carter's."

"All right, cap'n," said Billy.

But there was some doubt in his tone, and Bob was glad he would soon be beyond the reach of argument.

Breakfast was hustled through in its usual way. If there was an unusual constraint in the boys' manner, Mr. Mayhew was too absorbed in his heifers to notice it.

The cows came down from the fresh dewy pasture to be milked, and wandered back in their desultory way as if the fresh, sweet smelling morning had been made solely for their enjoyment. Then the heifers were separated from the herd, Billy was mounted on old Dobbin and the cavalcade was ready.

"Three at the latest," Bob said in a low voice as he straightened Dobbin's bridle.

Billy nodded. Then he laughed.

"I'll miss you, Bobby, all day long. Kiss me good-

bye. If you get homesick without me, I've left my last stick of candy under your pillow to comfort you."

"Oh, go on," said Bob, embarrassed by Billy's nonsense under the eyes of Mr. Mayhew.

"Yes, go on, go on," said the old man. "You won't gain nothin' by sittin' mumblin' things folks can't hear. Drive them critters easy now. It's going to be considerable hot, and if you get 'em excited and het up they won't be no mortal good. You've got all day before you."

"Yes," said Billy with another mischievous grin, "and days are long this time of year. Good-bye, Uncle Silas."

He held out his hand, but the old man turned away.

"Don't ye be so foolish. Come, get a move on ye."

"Don't miss me too much, and don't forget the candy. It'll be a comfort," called back Billy.

"What did he say?" asked the old man.

"I don't know what he is talking about," said Bob, drawing a long breath. He had been in torment for the last few moments lest Billy's attempts at wit should betray their plans. But apparently Uncle Silas was still unsuspicious.

"Ef he was talkin' about wastin' his money on candy, he might better hev left it with me," the old

man grumbled. "You can't learn too early to be savin'. 'Spare at the brim and you won't hev to scrape at the bottom.'"

"My father lets us spend our money as we choose," said Bob. He was ready to take offense at anything this morning. Mr. Mayhew gave a short harsh laugh.

"He seems to let you do a good many things you'd do different ef you belonged to me. Get along to work now. There ain't no need to stand idlin' here all the mornin'."

"There's no need for any one to criticise my father," said Bob hotly. Then he flung himself away lest he should say too much. But the short conversation had not left any better feeling between himself and Mr. Mayhew.

Billy's heifers walked around the turn of the road demurely enough. But then they began at once to prove themselves crazy young things not yet sufficiently old or wise to be out without their mothers to guide and counsel them. Presently one of them was seized with a fancy that she was a lamb, and she began to gambol. "If you knew how silly you looked, you'd stop," said Billy.

His reproof had a short effect, but in fifteen minutes more, two of them had scrambled down a steep bank

to a brook. They stopped for a leisurely drink, and Billy could get them to move, only by flourishing at them from the opposite side of the bank. That started them off toward home on a mad gallop. Billy pursued, outraced them, and once more turned their heads toward Carter's. This time he ran them past the dangerous spot, that they should have no time to consider temptation. Then he pulled his horse up and wiped his hot forehead.

"You're excited enough, sure," he said. "And I'm sure I'm 'het up' enough. Why can't you behave like civilized cows and not like monkeys?"

They went on very soberly for a little time, stopping along for nibbles of grass until Billy grew impatient.

"Because I didn't want a steeple chase, there's no need to lie down and take to chewing your cuds," he exclaimed, and incautiously started up the nearest heifer with a touch of his whip.

She resented such an unexpected move, and, flourishing her heels in the face of the astonished Dobbin, she started on a fresh canter. The cows ahead heard her coming and joined the rush. Unfortunately there was a wood-path just ahead, and in an instant Billy saw the last tail whisk out of sight behind the trees.

He felt decidedly cross. The sun was high by this time and the day extremely warm. The cows once in the woods it might be hours before he could get them out. There was no Bob to help. He must manage alone, for he would be ashamed to go back and ask for help on this, his first independent expedition.

There was nothing to do but follow the cows in. Billy wiped his forehead again, shrugged his shoulders, and then falling back on his customary good-natured whistle he turned Dobbin into the narrow path.

The truants felt their power of teasing, seemingly, and invented more pranks than Billy had ever conceived a cow's brain was capable of. All his efforts drove them only further into the wood. He was obliged to throw Dobbin's bridle over a branch and take to the chase afoot.

No sooner did he get one cow started on the right path than another would disappear. When that one was recovered, the first was gone again. At last, hot and discouraged, he flung himself down on a bank almost past caring whether the cows were ever extricated or not.

The sun was climbing high toward the zenith. As Billy looked up at it through the tree branches he was

reminded that it was time to feel hungry. He had not made a third of his journey yet, and, at this rate, he should meet Bob about midnight. But he might as well improve the moments by getting rid of the luncheon tied to his saddle.

The thought put fresh life into him, and he went back to the tree where he had left his horse. But he had not fastened the bridle securely, and there was no longer a horse there. Doubtless Dobbin was jogging contentedly toward home.

There was nothing to whistle over now. No horse, four lost cows, and, worst of all, no lunch. Billy ran down the path, hoping to see Dobbin stopping by the roadside for a bite of grass.

At the first turning, there was nothing to be seen; nor at the second. As the boy twisted the third time he saw ahead of him not one horse but two. One was Dobbin: the other was a gay, little black horse, ridden by a tall elderly gentleman.

"It's the colonel," said Billy to himself. Then he went forward and lifted his cap.

"Are you the boy who belongs to this horse?" asked the old gentleman, knitting the heavy brows that made his kindly face look a little severe. "Haven't I seen you before somewhere?"

Billy was beaming and blushing at the same time. "You told me and my brother where we could get our wheels mended a few weeks ago."

"Ah, yes. That accounts for it. I knew I remembered your face; it is very familiar to me. How came you to lose your horse? You're not hurt, are you?"

"Oh, no, sir. I tied Dobbin up while I tried to get the heifers out of the woods, and he got away. I'm awfully obliged to you for catching him."

"Not at all. Where are your heifers now?"

"In the woods," said Billy with his hopeful smile.

The colonel looked at the boy for a moment and knitted his brow again thoughtfully.

"In the woods?" he repeated, as if his mind were wool gathering. "How are you going to get them out? Have you any one to help you?"

"No, sir."

"You'll never get them out alone," the old gentleman said, his interest coming back. "How many are there?"

"Four."

"Four crazy heifers in the woods are not a joke. You don't look an out and out country boy. Are you used to cows?"

"Not to this kind," said Billy, laughing.

"Where are you going?"

"To Carter's."

"There's no way to Carter's through the woods, and if you drive your herd out on this path again you'll only start them toward home, and they'll lead you a lively chase. I am used to cows: all sorts of them. I've got more than you could count in five minutes, and I think perhaps I can manage them better than you could. I'll try anyhow. You go back to the highway, and I'll go in and drive your cows out to you. It will be your part to head them off and keep them out of the woods for the rest of the journey."

"Oh, but that will make you such a lot of trouble," stammered Billy.

"Nothing that helps anybody is too much trouble," answered the colonel with a hearty smile that took all the sternness from his face. "Let's see you mount. That's it. Now be off."

"He's a dandy," thought Billy. "I wouldn't want him to be mad at me, for he could make you feel like dried peas. But his eyes are so kind, perhaps he couldn't be very mad. He's a good old chap, anyhow, to help me out like this."

Billy sat on guard in the highroad, so absorbed in

thought that he quite forgot this was a moment open to the possibility of eating. Presently one heifer's nose came poking along through the leaves. Billy sat like a statue, and, after a moment's consideration, she stepped out on the road, chose an inviting bit of grass and began to nibble with her head toward Carter's. Then another black nose appeared, and, before half an hour was gone, all four of the returned prodigals were innocently grazing by the roadside, while Dobbin slept with mild jerks of his aged head; and no one would suspect any one of them of past evil.

Billy waited five minutes more for the colonel to appear, but he did not come.

"He must be one of the kind that doesn't like to listen to thanks," thought the boy rather ruefully. "He's gone the other way, and it's no good waiting any longer. Go on now, you contrary beasts, and see what else you can do between this and Carter's."

But the colonel had given them some good advice, and they went obediently and sedately over the rest of their journey, walking into town about one o'clock as quietly as if they had come all the way at that pace.

Billy found the proper person to whom to deliver them, and thankfully resigned his responsibility.

The keeper looked at him somewhat curiously.

"Silas Mayhew?" he asked. "That's funny. I was there only last week and he didn't say anything about any heifers. I thought he'd sold all his Holsteins."

"His cattle are all Holsteins," said Billy shortly. If the keeper thought him green and was chaffing him he would show him his mistake. He ignored the man's incredulous smile and turned away to devote himself to his luncheon.

It was a small private show of blooded cattle. Billy was not enough of an expert to study them knowingly, and, after admiring a few especially fine beasts, his interest flagged. There was no amusement left but to wander idly about the town.

"Bob'll be here soon now," he thought as he paused before the attractive window of a baker's shop. "He's always ahead of time. He didn't give me my letter, did he? He was too excited to remember anything this morning. I hope he'll get out the wheels. I wonder if he'll look for his candy," and Billy laughed to herself.

"Those buns look powerfully good. Uncle Silas's lunch wasn't over hearty. Haven't I even got a nickel anywhere in my clothes?"

But no magic had filled his pockets over night. He

found the mutilated dime and the big silver dollar, but he put them back with no thought of spending them. Bob had ordered him to keep the dime: that was enough for that coin. As for the dollar, nothing on earth could make him spend that.

"Wasn't I silly to let the colonel go this morning and not give him back his dollar," thought Billy. "I was as flustered as old Bobs could be. I hope I'll see Colonel Smith somewhere again, for I don't want him to think I'm a beggar. I can't spend it anyway. If I never can give it back I'll keep it as a medal."

He laughed at his own whim, but down in his secret heart he had a feeling that the coin in his pocket made him braver and straighter and stronger—so ardent was the admiration conceived for the old man he had seen but twice.

"Well, if I can't have any cakes," he said heroically, "I'll go back and wait for Bob."

He strolled away with his hands in his pockets, thinking, in a vague sort of way, of the difference in old age; of the contrast between his erect, commanding, kindly old friend and the bent, slovenly, avaricious old age of Silas Mayhew. For some reason, his encounter with the colonel had made him more willing to leave Uncle Silas.

## CHAPTER XIII

### AND MAKES A NEW FRIEND

"I CAN begin to look for Bob any time now," Billy said to himself as he came back into the fair grounds. "The road's pretty good, and ten miles are nothing even with two wheels. I'll keep my eyes open for him now."

But Billy's eyes were very easily turned. The first thing he met was a Punch and Judy show, with a very clever and amusing Punch. Billy listened to him without thought of time or brother. His only trouble was that he had no money to drop into the showman's hat.

"It's mean to look at a fellow's show and not give him anything," Billy thought. "I wonder if I can't find a job anywhere!"

Full of this new thought, Bob was once more forgotten, while Billy sought for work. The grounds were almost deserted now in the heat of the day and jobs were not waiting to be done. Billy had almost given over his attempt when a lady drove up to the place he was standing. She was driving a sorrel horse

in a long buckboard. Billy recognized her at once as the kind-faced woman he had seen on the veranda of the big house the day they visited the sheriff.

She looked around now rather helplessly till she caught Billy's eye. He smiled and raised his hat.

"How do you do?" she said. "I wonder if you can tell me what I can do with my horse. I came over to see some ponies some one told me were here."

"I'll be glad to watch your horse for you," Billy said. "I'm just waiting for my brother. The ponies are in that stall over in the corner. They're wild little things, but one of them's a beauty."

"Thank you, then, so much," the lady said, stepping out of the buckboard. "The Judge thinks I'm pretty good about picking out horses and he wanted me to see if there was a pony here fit for a boy to ride. He was too busy to come himself. Dixie is perfectly easy; just give him his head."

"He's a beauty," said Billy, lovingly. He fondled the horse's soft nose as the lady tripped away across the field. "Except that little black horse, he's ——"

A wild commotion in the far corner made him turn his head.

The wild little ponies had all day been restless in the small yard where they were confined. They had

pushed each other against the barriers until one weak spot had given way. The outside pony saw his chance for freedom and made a dash for the outer world. He was followed by all the others. When Billy looked up he saw a dark cloud of flashing legs, and tossing tails and manes, sweeping across the field. Directly in its path stood his new acquaintance without an effort to escape. She was evidently paralyzed with fear.

Billy was not good at thinking. He acted now on impulse. He tumbled into the buckboard and shook the reins over Dixie's back. With a little snort, the horse started forward with a bound. In spite of his excitement, however, he obeyed Billy's guiding hand. He kept his best pace until he reached his mistress, and then stopped short when Billy pulled him up. The buckboard made a bulwark between the lady and the charging ponies. They broke their ranks as they reached it, and the tide flowed forward on each side, leaving the lady safe but trembling. The good little horse was shaking too.

"You'd better get in," Billy said, afraid to let go the reins. "The ponies may come back."

"Oh, yes, let me get in at once, and drive me out of this place, please. I couldn't hold the reins; my hands are shaking so."

"All right," said Billy cheerfully, "I guess I'd better take you home. I don't know your name, but I know where you live."

"Oh, do you? Yes, that's nice. Yes, I'm glad. My name is Myers, Miss Myers."

"And your house is the big one down the road with the pretty garden. I saw you there one day."

"Yes. It isn't mine, you know, but I live there. I'm housekeeper. It is a pretty place. My, I'm so nervous I don't know what I'm talking about."

"I'm going to build a house just like that some time," Billy said. "It's just the kind I'd like to live in."

"It's a pleasant house, a real pleasant house," Miss Myers answered. "The Judge sets great store by it. He says all it lacks is children. We did expect to have some children in the house this summer; 'twas for them I was to look at the ponies. But don't say ponies to me again. I don't know yet whether I'm afoot or a-horseback. That was very brave and quick of you," she added, turning suddenly to Billy. "I guess you saved my life. How can I thank you?"

"It wasn't anything," said Billy blushing, and then there was a long silence. "Here's your house," exclaimed Billy at length.

"Sure enough. Will you come in now and get rested?"

"I can't," Billy replied hastily. "I forgot about Bob. I must get back as quick as I can so I won't miss him."

"Who's Bob?"

"He's my brother. He's going to meet me at the fair and we're going home to-night. Do you know about the New York trains?"

"Trains? You don't want to take trains to-night. Is your brother bigger than you?"

"We're just of a size. I'll have to hurry now. Good-bye."

"Come back here with your brother. Come back to supper. I must thank you again. And I'll give you whatever you want for supper."

"A great big beefsteak and fried potatoes," laughed Billy.

"Well, you come back; you aren't old enough to run around in trains at night. What's your name?"

"Billy Boynton," the boy answered with a farewell bow. "I'll come if Bob will, but I'm afraid he won't. Good-bye."

Billy was off then. It was half-past three before he

reached the fair grounds again. His Punch was addressing a larger audience now.

"I didn't earn anything, did I?" thought Billy. "And I don't see much chance to. Maybe I can pay him in work if I can't in money. I wonder if he'd like me to help him move his show?"

Punch was very glad of a helping hand to move to a new stand. Billy grew warm again with his exertion but felt that he had cleared his score. Then he went on to look for Bob.

No Bob was to be found, however, in any corner far or near. Billy began to feel uncomfortable.

"Maybe he came while I was gone and I've missed him, or maybe he hasn't come at all. If he hasn't something's wrong. He could have walked it by this time even if he didn't get the wheels. Bob doesn't stick at trifles. When he says he'll be there, he's there. I've never in my life known Bob not to do what he said he would. I wonder if the old man's queered him anyway. I must go and find out. There's no use waiting here all night. If I've missed him, I've missed him, and if he's home, I'll find him somehow."

So patient Dobbin was brought out and gladly turned his nose toward home again.

And as Billy rode, his new friend Miss Myers, still a bit hysterical, was exclaiming to herself,

"He said his name was Billy Boynton, and he had blue eyes. Where are my senses gone? He said his name was Billy Boynton, and the Judge isn't home. I can't seem to think what to do. He did say his name was Billy Boynton."

## CHAPTER XIV

### BILLY PLAYS A PRACTICAL JOKE

In the meantime, what was Bob about?

He had gone off to his weeding chafing with anger. His only comfort was the knowledge that his mother's letters were in his pocket; that he knew where to lay his hand on some money which he was sure was rightfully his; and that his hours with Uncle Silas were numbered. He made no attempt to read his letters; it was enough to know he had them; they could wait until he was quite beyond the reach of Mr. Mayhew. The boy had tried his best to be dutiful to his mother's uncle, but now his one thought was escape from this utterly miserable life.

He worked in utter silence through the whole morning beside Mr. Mayhew. At half-past eleven the old man left him and went to the house to look after dinner. Bob toiled on for another half hour, and then straightened his tired back, with a thought of dinner.

"I'd almost rather go hungry than eat with him," he thought, "but it's the last time and I'm sure we've earned all we can eat. I'm hungry enough to make

way with the barn door. I can't ride to Carter's without something inside me. We have been here almost four weeks, and it seems four years. I hope you won't think I'm a muff, mumsie, but if you could know how bad it is, I don't believe you'd ask us to stay. Maybe he used to be good to you, but he is terribly mean to me. Won't I be glad to get home, just."

He looked around for his coat, but it was gone. He set his teeth hard, and a dogged look came into his face.

In the kitchen Mr. Mayhew was eating a disorderly dinner in a way which made Bob wish he had stayed to dine alone on the barn door.

"Late again," mumbled the old man. "Them that's late, don't get no meat," and, helping himself to a second slice, he carried the rest away.

Bob found his coat beside the kitchen dresser: for a wonder the letters were still in the breast pocket. He ate his dinner in silence and started to leave the table.

"I want you should come down in the medder with me," Mr. Mayhew said.

"I've a line of onions to weed yet."

"Onions can wait; you come with me."

"What do you want me to do there?" asked Bob.

"That's none of your business," answered the old man roughly. "You keep still and do as you're bid."

Bob grew obstinate.

"If you can give me any good reason for wanting me, I'll go. If you can't I'd rather finish the work I've begun."

Mr. Mayhew's face darkened. "You'd better look out," he said, threateningly. "I can be ugly when I want to be. You're too sulky to suit me, and you ain't worth the salt you eat. You'd better not get rambunctious or you won't find things as pleasant as they have been. Your father and mother can be foolish about you if they want to, but I won't."

Bob went out of the room with a dash. He would not trust himself to answer, but his heart was bursting with anger.

"That settles it," he said, through his set teeth. "Father would never say we should stay here to be insulted. Billy's safe out of it and in another hour I will be too."

He had left the house, but he did not go either to the big meadow or back to the onions. He went through the pasture bars, and scrambled up the hill

over the grass and among the rocks. The cows looked at him, wondering if it were already milking time, but he paid them little attention. Under the big maple at the top he knew he should find a breeze, if wind were stirring anywhere. And he would be hidden from the old man's view.

He flung himself down on the fresh soft grass, and laid his hot face against it. Mother Nature will usually comfort any one who will let her, and, presently, Bob's angry, buzzing brain and sore heart began to quiet a bit. The cows near by were contentedly chewing the cud in calm denial of excitement or unhappiness. Down below, the brook gurgled among the trees: from the distance came the tinkle of a cow-bell; the little breeze blew over the boy's head. The place was peace itself, and Bob's anger began to melt. In its place came a great wave of homesickness, and Bob's jacket sleeves could have told of two or three wet spots. But he fought against this feeling as a disgrace. He sat up straight, winked away a tear from his lashes, and felt in his pocket for his mother's letters.

Just then Mr. Mayhew came out of the house and disappeared over the little hill behind the house.

"Now is my chance," thought Bob, coming back to

the state of existing things. "The letters must wait again. Great Scott! What an idiot I am!"

For, though the letters had been undisturbed, the key was not in his pocket.

"Of course he took it," groaned the boy. "How could I ever have left the jacket out of my sight? Even Billy wouldn't have been as careless as that It's possible I might have lost it, but there isn't one chance in a hundred. I can't even remember where I had it last; everything is so mixed up since last night. If he's got it, it's in his pocket, so all I can do is to see if I've lost it. Let's see—the way he walks I haven't got more than twenty minutes all told. What an idiot I am! I've waited all day for my chance, and then let it slip through my fingers."

Bob went down the hill slowly, searching every step of the way among the rocks and short grass. He racked his brain to remember when he had had the key last, but his memory would not serve him. He had made his mind do too much working and planning since he had found his letters. But he had had the key and the letters together; the latter were still in his pocket. Either the key must have been taken by Uncle Silas, or have fallen out. If Uncle Silas had had his suspicions aroused, that was why he wanted to

keep the boy with him; or was he only doing it to annoy him?

All the way to the house door Bob explored, and thence to the field where the onions were growing. He went carefully up and down the rows under the hot sun, conscious that the precious moments were slipping away and he was spending them in vain. There was no key to be found among the onions.

Back to the house then he sped, wiping the perspiration from his hot face as he ran. He searched under the kitchen table; up the stairway; all about the floor of his own room. It was an untidy looking place just then. It received no other care than the boys gave it and this morning it stood just as they had left it when they hurried down-stairs in answer to Mr. Mayhew's call.

"It's no use, then," said Bob gloomily, sitting down on the edge of the tumbled bed. "There's no good looking any more. I almost hate him. How can mother love him? I wish I didn't belong to him. Well, I'll have to leave the wheels, but I've got two legs to walk on, and I won't stay in this hole, whatever happens."

He sat still a moment thinking. Yes, all he could do now, was to face Mr. Mayhew, tell him he was

going, and demand the wheels. If he gave them up, well and good. If not, then it meant a tramp of ten miles, and the beloved bicycles left to the untender care of the old man. But it was the best that could be done, though Bob came to the decision mournfully. He loved his wheel almost as he would have loved a horse, and it went against the grain to desert it.

"It's all I can do," he concluded, and gave the pillow a vicious thump with his fist. It doubled up under the blow, and showed beneath it the handle of a big key.

Bob seized it and was down-stairs in two jumps. That miserable Billy! So this was the meaning of the nonsense about the stick of candy Bob had scorned. He had hidden the key for Bob to find when he made the bed, never thinking in his scatterbrain that Bob would not make the bed in which he had no intention of sleeping again. How had he ever gotten hold of the key in the first place? Never mind; Bob had it now and was almost ready to laugh at Billy's kidnapping.

As Bob sped through the kitchen he saw that seventeen of his precious twenty minutes were gone. But three were quite enough for the little that remained

to be done. It was a close call. The joke might have cost them dear.

Probably Billy had been laughing all day at the ease with which he had duped him. Never mind, he'd thrash him when he caught him again.

Bob wasted no time between the kitchen and the "new shed." It was new only in virtue of being the least old of all the outbuildings. It was a dingy place without and an unlighted, cobwebby place within. Mr. Mayhew did not waste money in putting in windows for no purpose, nor in scrubbing unnecessary corners.

Bob put the key in the lock with a sudden tremor lest it should not be the right one. But there was no obstruction: the bolt slipped back.

Just then a little red head peeped cautiously around the corner, but Bob did not see it, nor hear Sandy's low call. He was thinking only of the bicycles.

Bob threw the door open wide and dashed into the dimness. There behind an old grindstone stood the two wheels. Bob laid his hand almost caressingly on the handle-bars.

Suddenly, his light darkened. He looked up; the door was shut to a crack, and, through that, peered old Silas's malicious face.

## CHAPTER XV

### SANDY HAS A FINGER IN THE PIE

Bob sprang forward, but he was too late. The key was in the lock and the door was shut and barred before he could reach it.

"Seeee you're so fond o' the shed, you ken stay there a spell," the old man chuckled.

With stout boards on every side, no window, and a strong lock, Bob knew that he was trapped. But Uncle Silas was listening outside and, in spite of his rage and shame, the boy made no sound.

"Humble pie's good eatin' for proud stomachs," Mr. Mayhew said tauntingly: "eat your fill: maybe by termorrer you won't be so hifalutin. I thought if I give you a long enough rope you'd hang your self. I ain't let you out of my sight much to day, but I guess I'm safe now to go and look after them pertaters."

There was another chuckle and then the sound of retreating steps. Bob went over to the door and tried it: it was fast.

Then he heard a soft footfall outside, and a still softer whisper.

"Bob."

"Is that you, Sandy? Does Mr. Mayhew know you're here?"

"No, he didn't see me. I jumped behind the shed. He's gone down over the hill now. What'll I do, Bob?"

Bob sat down on a box to think the matter over. His only hope of escape from this humiliating position lay in Sandy; the little Sandy whom he had always held in a certain contempt. For, think as hard as he could, he could devise no plan to help himself out. Billy was beyond reach; the moments were fleeing, and at any one of them Mr. Mayhew might come back and find Sandy. That would cut off Bob's last means of communication with the outside world.

"What'll I do, Bob?" repeated Sandy.

"Go and tell Pig Polly that I'm locked up here and that Billy's gone to Carter's," Bob said. "And be sure the old man doesn't see you."

"All right," whispered the little voice, and the quiet feet stole away.

A great silence fell over the shed. Bob lay down on some bags in the far corner and began in earnest to eat his humble pie. Hour followed hour as Bob lay there among the cobwebs in the dark. He learned

some things that afternoon that he never forgot. He had always thought himself equal to anything: he could take care of himself and Billy too. Now his fine plans had come to naught: he had had to cast himself on the mercy and cleverness of a little boy and an old woman. It chafed Bob's pride intolerably. But, as one minute followed another, and Bob got deeper and deeper into his own heart something better than pride was stirred there. He saw that the old Bob had some faults he had never before stopped to think about; and he resolved that the Bob that was to be should think a little less of himself and a little more of others.

Sandy tumbled down the hill, through the woods, across the brook, and burst in on Pig Polly breathless.

"Bob's locked up!" he cried. "Bob's locked up. I saw his boss do it, and Billy's gone to Carter's."

Mrs. Polly questioned the boy in vain. He knew no more than that Bob was locked up and must be gotten out. Yes, maybe the boss locked Bob up because they went after the sheriff. Sandy didn't know: Bob hadn't told him. But Bob was locked up and must be let out.

"And me not able to stir a step," mourned Pig

Polly. "I wonder if he didn't get his letter yet: or maybe he ain't read it. I know his ways: he never reads a letter or writes one if he can help it. But 'twas all I could do. Now I'll have to go and find him. He's a justice o' the peace, I know: I hope he won't let old Silas do nothin' to me." Polly tried to rise to her feet, but sank back. "It don't seem, anyway, as if I could take that long drive," she groaned. "I guess you'll have to go, Sandy."

"Will I be in time?" asked Sandy anxiously.

"You'll have to ride one of the horses."

"Ride horseback!" gasped the boy.

"Yes, there ain't no other way. Jenny's gentle as a kitten, and she'll have an easy back. She can go good too. You'll just have to ride till you find the Judge. I'm glad I told you about it last night. Go to his house first, and if he ain't there, find out where he is and ride after him till you find him. Things is going too far; altogether too far." Sandy was shaking in every limb.

"I'm awful 'fraid of a horse," he said.

Mrs. Polly looked at him with her kindly gray eyes very serious.

"But that ain't going to make you leave your friend shut up in the dark all day and night, Sandy. You say

your prayers and hold on tight and nothin's goin' to hurt you. Bring Jenny up by this window and I'll tell you how to put the saddle on."

"I wish I was brave like Billy," murmured the little boy as he ran toward the pasture. He did not know that he was doing a more heroic thing than any that Billy had ever done yet.

His heart was beating so fast that he could scarcely see as he scrambled from the branch of an apple-tree upon Jenny's back. As she began to move he clutched her mane with both hands.

"Sit up, sit up," called Polly encouragingly. "Hold on with your knees; let your bridle loose. There, you're a brave boy, and I'm proud of you. It ain't two o'clock yet. When you get used to it a little you'll go faster; the faster you go the quicker things'll straighten out. I suppose you didn't have no time to tell your friend what I told you last night?"

Sandy shook his head: he had no voice for speech.

"There, go on now. Good luck to you. Steady, Jenny."

Jenny pricked her ears at her mistress's voice, and walked sedately down over the brook. By the time they were through the wood-path and upon the road,

Sandy had stopped thinking the saddle was a toboggan slide: it was no worse than a rocking-chair, and he never had fallen off a rocking-chair. The boy patted his horse's neck timidly and Jenny turned and looked at him with soft, intelligent eyes. Sandy felt her friendliness.

"We might go a little faster," he said, tightening his rein.

That had been a sign from a former master that Jenny was to canter. She forgot she belonged to a pig-wagon nowadays, and fell into her old easy swing. It was so easy that it could not frighten even Sandy. He felt the exhilaration of the motion, and, when Jenny settled down again into a walk, was ready, with a sense of pleasure, to stir her back to a faster pace. He was feeling a thrill he had never before known in his compressed life. Sandy, as well as Bob, was learning something to-day.

Billy's colonel was not at home when Sandy reached the house. There was no one but a servant who said her master had been gone all day, looking for laborers, and might not be home till dark. He was most likely by this time over behind Elmscote: Sandy would better try that way.

So Sandy started off on his chase. But it was in

vain; at two places, black Romeo had been and gone; nowhere else could Sandy find any trace of the man he was after. He had used more than two hours in his search and had accomplished nothing. And all this time Bob was waiting for him in the dark.

As Sandy was about to give up in despair, he struck another clue; it was at a farmhouse a couple of miles back of the blacksmith's. Romeo's master had not been there yet, but he was surely going to call this afternoon; he might be there any minute.

"Well, I'll go on and see if I meet him then," said breathless Sandy, "and when he comes please ask him right away whether he got Pig Polly's letter, and tell him to read it. And if he didn't, tell him to come to Pig Polly's awful quick."

"Is she sick?" asked the farmer. But Sandy was off; he had no time to answer questions. It was very close to five o'clock, and he must be getting home to Polly to see what to do next. He had lost his fear, and urged Jenny to her best gait.

His road led him down past the blacksmith's shop, and then it was but a short ride home. He crossed but one road between the shop and his own home. He had not been gone five minutes past the crossing,

before Romeo trotted down the crossroad and carried his master toward the blacksmith's shop.

And in the big house between Carter's and Elmscote, Miss Myers was still, with puckered brow, murmuring, "Billy Boynton."

## CHAPTER XVI

### BILLY COMES HOME FROM THE FAIR

And Billy in the meantime was pushing old Dobbin toward home at a pace the old horse had almost forgotten that he owned.

"I never knew Bobby to go back on himself before," Billy repeated. "I wish I knew what had happened to him. 'And Sheridan twenty miles away.' I ought to meet him around any corner now."

But Billy turned one corner after another and still did not meet his brother. Billy did not often stop to question the progress of events. He enjoyed life as it came, whichever side it showed him. If there were an occasional piece that was not pleasant, Billy ignored it. But this was a fact that must be faced. Bob had failed him for the first time in his life and there was no one but Billy to work the matter out: it was no light cause that could drive Bob from his usual exact habits.

Through Elmscote village at last, and then the blacksmith's shop. There were two men standing outside the shop beside a horse. Billy glanced at

them as he went by; then, in surprise, pulled Dobbin up short, turned, and went back.

The horse was black Romeo, and one of the men was Billy's friend, the colonel. The other was the blacksmith. With a sulky face, he held Romeo firmly by the bridle. On the face of the old man was a look of mingled vexation, perplexity and amusement. He recognized Billy at once and smiled at him in a friendly way.

"Hello," he said. "It's my little friend that carries the sunshine in his face. How are the heifers?"

"They're all right, thank you, sir," Billy said, slipping to the ground. "I'm glad to see you again, for I owe you a dollar and I forgot to give it to you this morning."

"Owe me a dollar? Bless you, lad, how did you ever get in my debt?"

"You gave me a dollar the day Bob broke his wheel," said Billy, blushing as he brought the silver dollar out of his pocket. "I'm awfully obliged to you —but, if you don't mind—I'd rather give it back."

The old gentleman turned the coin on the palm of his hand and looked curiously from it to Billy.

"I'd forgotten I gave it to you. Is it the self-same dollar? Why didn't you spend it?"

"My father wouldn't like me to.'

The colonel laughed.

"Well, I'm glad of your principles this time. I'll take it back and thank you, too. I think you and I are doomed to help each other out of difficulties. You've gotten me out of a tight place this time; I'd just begun to think I'd have to live here. Romeo dropped a shoe two or three miles up the road, and I stopped here to have him shod—and then found I hadn't a penny in my pocket."

Billy gave a broad smile as if to say he knew that feeling.

"Well, it isn't pleasant, is it?" the old man went on, "especially as our friend here wouldn't trust me. I thought I was pretty well known about here, but my name doesn't carry much weight with this gentleman."

The blacksmith to-day was in one of his ugliest and most stupid moods. He released his hold on the horse's bridle when he saw the money, muttering something sulky, and, at the same time, quite unintelligible about "a mean man; no trust." The colonel did not even try to understand him, for he was still looking at Billy.

"You've helped me out of a difficulty, youngster,

and we're square. I'd like to see you again. Where are you staying? and where is your brother?"

The cloud came back to Billy's face, and he hastily swung himself astride of his horse.

"That's just what I don't know. I'd forgotten about it. I'm afraid there's something wrong. We're staying at Mr. Silas Mayhew's down the road."

Dobbin, struck by a fresh thought of his waiting stall, carried Billy off unceremoniously without giving him time to say good-bye.

The old gentleman looked after Billy in amazement, until his attention was recalled by the blacksmith. He gave over the dollar, and while the man was gone to his house for the change, the colonel stood lost in thought.

"Silas Mayhew's! What does the boy mean? I'd almost forgotten that old scamp. I'll look those lads up to-morrow; they've no business in a place like that. I wonder how they ever got there. That boy's smile makes me feel twenty years younger somehow. I haven't seen anything so fresh and sweet since my little girl left me."

He took his change, mounted Romeo, and turned him up the hill behind the shop. The horse went along easily and carried his master at length to the farm-

house where the message was waiting for him. It was given to him before he was out of the saddle.

Wonderingly, the old man felt in his pockets until he pulled forth Pig Polly's letter. He broke the envelope and slowly read the cramped writing. Then with an exclamation, he pressed his heels into his horse, and Romeo carried him out of the yard with a bound.

The farmer looked after him in astonishment.

"I should think every one was crazy to-day," he said, as he went in to his supper.

As Billy and Dobbin trotted into the barn, old Silas was there pulling down hay.

"Where's Bob?" demanded Billy.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Why didn't you stay a spell? I'd about given you up. I reckon you forgot there was evenin' chores to do. There ain't no supper for lazy boys."

"Where's Bob?" demanded Billy again. For once supper looked unimportant to him, in view of his greater trouble. He was thinking of something else than of his next meal.

Silas chuckled.

"Ain't he went to the fair? I took a notion I see him gittin' ready to go."

"Did he start? Do you know where he is?"

"No. I only mistrusted this mornin' he had the idee in his head. I don't know as he exactly started."

Mayhew's tone exasperated Billy. He turned Dobbin sharply into his stall and left the barn without another word.

Had Bob left or was he here?

Billy went through the house from top to bottom, calling Bob's name in every room. It was a somewhat aimless search. He had never used his brain for any steady thinking, and he could not make it serve him now to point out to him the most likely spot in which to find his brother.

With no Bob in the house, Billy realized fully for the first time how comfortless and uncleanly life was here. The world looked big and vague and empty. In all its huge space where was Bob? All of his people were gone, and he was left alone. Life, for the first time, got away down to the bottom of Billy's big heart and touched it into earnestness. The familiar picture over which he had so often groaned—his hated books in the familiar library, with Bob on the other side of the table; his mother's ready smile whenever he looked up to meet it; his father's jokes—seemed to him now a picture of paradise. After the manner of the heroes

of old, he registered a vow that if he should come safely through this experience to his own home and the ones he loved there, no one should ever again have reason to remind him that washing before meals was a necessity, or that every boy must study many things if he would become a cultivated gentleman. Then with a deeper effort still, he started his lazy brain to work and, with a scowl of thought on his brow, stood trying to think out Bob's usual haunts, and where he was most likely to be found.

Suddenly his forehead cleared. "Crickets!" he exclaimed. "I'll try the new shed. The captain was bound to get the wheels out, and maybe he got caught himself."

In another minute Billy was outside Bob's dungeon. He tried the door, but it was fast. Billy threw himself flat on the ground that he might speak through the crack beneath the door.

"Bobby," he called eagerly. "Hullo," came a muffled voice from inside, and Billy's heart gave a bound of joy. Half of home came back with Bob's voice, and the vow about Cæsar and the shining shoes sank a little deeper.

"I thought no one ever would turn up," Bob said. "What became of Sandy? Don't waste any more

time. Uncle Silas has the key; find him and get it some way, and let me out, or I'll smother."

Billy sprang to his feet. As he turned, close behind him stood old Mayhew.

"You'd better be off to your work and not prowlin' about where you ain't no business to be," he said.

"My business is right here," said Billy shortly. "I'd like the key to this door, please."

"Ask your brother for it," chuckled the old man.

"Where's the key?" demanded Billy.

"Where you ain't likely to get it in a hurry," said Mr. Mayhew, making a clutch at his pocket.

"I'll get it within five minutes, and we'll be out of this five minutes later."

Billy made a step forward and old Silas backed away with a look of alarm growing on his avaricious face.

"Oh, come now, you ain't goin' to git mad over a little joke. You come for all summer and you ain't been here a month yet."

"Give me the key," said Billy.

"And there's all the rye to get in, and them pesky onions is full o' weeds."

"I will have the key."

"And I can't afford to hire. Besides there's them heifers ——"

"I want that key."

"If I give it to you will you stay?"

"No, I wouldn't stay if you gave me the whole farm."

Old Mayhew stepped back a little more.

"Then I'll throw the key down the well, and that sour-faced, soft-handed brother of yours ken stay there till he starves."

There is a proverb that says, "Beware the fury of a patient man." Billy, so seldom angry in all his life, now lost his head completely. The insult to Bob, the sight of the scowling face opposite him took away his senses and his self-control. He forgot all considerations of age and relationship; for the moment he felt like a wild beast.

Old Mayhew drew the key from his pocket and shook it threateningly at the boy. Before he could turn, Billy, always good at football, charged with his head down. The old man went over like a ninepin, and the key, flying from his hand, went really clattering down to the bottom of the well.

## CHAPTER XVII

### BLACK ROMEO TO THE RESCUE

THE old man lay huddled on the ground, and Billy stood over him with wrathful eyes. He was almost ready to throw Uncle Silas after the key, when his attention was turned by a furious rattle of wagon wheels.

Up the hill, bounding and straining, came Pig Polly's two chubby horses. On the box sat Polly herself, and beside her was Sandy, his cheeks flushed, his soft red hair flying wild.

Uncle Silas scrambled to his feet. In spite of her lame ankle, Polly descended from her seat and confronted him.

"Where's the boy?" she demanded.

"He's locked up in that shed and the key's down the well," answered Billy, "and we've got to get it. Sandy, can you go down? You're a regular cat at climbing, and I guess I can pull you up again; you don't weigh much. You couldn't pull me."

"I guess I can go," said Sandy, hopefully. He was stiff from his long ride, but he was always ready to obey Billy.

"I can't pull much," said Polly. "Hurt my arm: and my foot too. Didn't know as I could get here, but I was bound I wouldn't let your brother be left to his mercy. Go on. I'll watch him till you get him in jail. It's where he belongs, and he knows it."

"Maybe he does," Billy answered, and he brought the dime from the depth of his pocket. "That's the punched dime you got at the post-office: Bob told me to keep it for proof. Come on, Sandy, Bob 'll be smothering. The dime will keep. Suppose I can't get you up again? It's like the fox and geese and bag of corn: we need Bobs to help get himself out."

The old man had looked a little astonished and uncomfortable at the mention of Bob's "proof," but he quickly recovered his self-possession.

"I see geese enough as far as that goes," he said politely. "And maybe there's a fox, and he may find a bag of corn. Some foxes can eat corn. Don't trouble to keep me company, sister-in-law. I shall do all right, and I ain't likely to run away from my own place. Go and help the other geese fish for the key. You might go down yourself: you're such a feather-weight. I'm quite comfortable, though you did shake me up considerable betwixt you. We'll see about the jail. I ain't done nothin' unlawful as the boys' gard-

een in holdin' their money over for 'em. And there is such things as charges for assault and battery. We'll see. Perhaps you ain't forgot, sister-in-law, that I always pay my debts."

Sandy had kicked off his shoes and was on the well curb. Pig Polly stood with her sound hand on the rope, waiting for the boy to make his descent. There was a flush on her swarthy, honest face as she listened to the old man's babble.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about money," she said, "but I'm sure it's no good."

"I know," said Billy, as he took a firm grasp of the rope, "and, what's more, Bob knows where the money is. Now, Sandy, grab tight! Crickets! he's heavier than I thought he was; don't let go, Polly."

Another anxious look had crossed Mr. Mayhew's face at Billy's second reference to the missing money. But a malicious smile took its place as he stood watching the three at the well. They were all absorbed. Old Silas took the horses by the heads, led them into the barn-yard where he had confined the pigs, and swung to the big gate. Then he took the padlock from his pocket and fastened the gate.

"Maybe you'll all make me a little visit now, sence you're such welcome callers," he chuckled to himself.

The only sound for a few moments was the clank of the well-chain. Then came a muffled call from the well: and the bucket rose again, pulled by Billy's strong young arms, with a helping hand from Polly. Sandy, holding the big key, stood once more on dry ground, with the water dripping from his arms and legs.

"Where are the horses?" he exclaimed, blinking in the light.

Billy's eyes ran from Mr. Mayhew's face quickly around the yard. "There they are," he said, "in the barn-yard where he put the pigs. We'll get them out if it takes the sheriff again. He didn't seem to want to see the sheriff before."

But Mr. Mayhew paid little attention to Billy's words. He was leaning forward with the malice deeper on his face.

"The geese and the fox," he said. "The fox got the corn all right and I hope the geese has enjoyed their bath and exercise. Young folks is always fond of them athletic things. It may have been a little hard on you, sister-in-law, owin' to your size and to your not bein' as young as you was once. I'm glad you've all enjoyed yourselves and made yourselves at home. And now," he added, as Billy fitted the key

into the lock, "now that you've had your trouble and got your key, maybe you'll be gratified to know, that though the latch works a little stiff, that door's been unlocked the last hour. If he'd 'a' wanted to get out, he could 'a' done it before ever you come."

Billy, speechless, put his weight on the latch and flung the door open. Bob, blinking and cobwebby, stepped out.

Just then there came a rush of horse's feet, and there in the yard stood black Romeo, pawing and snorting, with the colonel on his back.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### HOW IT ALL ENDED

THE scene was so extraordinary, that, for a moment, the colonel looked on in silence; dripping Sandy, dusty Bob, ruffled Billy, Pig Polly's horses stretching their heads over the fence toward their mistress, and, last of all, the old man, who visibly shrank and cowered at sight of the newcomer. It was to him the colonel spoke.

"What evil have you been up to now?" he asked sternly. "I know you and I have power to put you in the lock-up. Explain yourself!"

Old Silas mumbled and said nothing. It was Bob who spoke. His pride drew back at having so many strangers mixed up in a family quarrel.

"It's all right now, sir. We've been staying with our uncle and we wanted to go home, and he tried to keep us. Polly came to help us out but it's all right now."

"Uncle!" repeated the colonel. "I say it's all wrong now. What is your name?

"Roberts Boynton."

"And your brother is William Boynton. He has your father's name and your mother's face. There are three very foolish people and one scoundrel in this business, and one sensible head: that's Polly's. What's the name of that hoary old sinner?"

"Silas Mayhew."

"And what's my name?"

"Colonel Wellington Smith," spoke up Billy.

The old gentleman looked at Billy in amazement.

"Nonsense. Whatever made you hang that name to me? Do I look as if I owned all the railroads in the country? I'm nothing but a farmer, but that old rascal knows my name if you don't. It is Silas Mayhew. Now who is your uncle?"

Both boys stared in open wonder; only Sandy smiled.

"Take your choice," said the old gentleman, enjoying the situation. "We are both Silas Mayhew. Which will you have?"

"Isn't he our uncle?" asked Bob solemnly.

"He's no more uncle to you than he is to one of Polly's pigs."

Polly snorted. "He ain't related to no pig of mine."

"Is it you?" gasped Billy.

The old gentleman laughed out.

"Yes, I'm it, if you're Annie Roberts' boys, and your face answers that question. I was stupid not to know you the minute I set eyes on you, but though your face puzzled me I couldn't place you. I expected little chaps with a nurse. I wasn't looking for giants, and to tell the truth, I'd most forgotten you."

Billy's eyes still looked ready to pop out of his head. Was he in a fairy play? Could it be true that he owed nothing to this old man who had treated them so badly, but that this hero of his fancy was really his uncle? What should he do? embrace him? or shake hands with Sandy or wrestle with Bob or kiss Mrs. Polly. It was so long since he had kissed anybody, he decided on the latter, and Mrs. Polly had more of a surprise than she had had for many a long day.

Then Billy turned to the old man.

"I beg your pardon for knocking you over," he said. "You made me pretty mad and I forgot. I'm sorry. Now please give me the key to that gate."

Old Mayhew made no answer. Billy took the padlock key from his hand and released the horses.

The real Uncle Silas spoke sternly. "You are liable to prosecution; you detained these boys on false pre-

tenses. You must have known where they belonged. Why didn't you set them straight?"

Old Mayhew was frightened but still sulky.

"'Twarn't none o' my business to go pryin' and questionin'," he mumbled. "It was just the busy time o' year, and if two smart, likely young fellers dropped down on me and told me they was my nephews and come to stay a spell, I warn't goin' to fly in the face o' Providence and turn 'em off. My wife's niece, she's got sons, and these might 'a' been them. Anyhow I took in these boys and fed 'em and cared for 'em, and they promised me a little board—but I ain't had any pay."

"Board!" thundered Uncle Silas. "Board for half starving two boys and working them to death. I'm not the one to try that game on. You'll pay them wages for every stroke of work they've done for you."

"He has all our money, anyhow," Bob said.

Uncle Silas reached the bottom of that story with very few questions.

"What are you doing here, Polly?" he asked, turning to her. "I thought you were going to keep out of sight in this business."

"I was. But he's a good boy; he was good to me;

and he was in trouble. Old Silas has paid me out before for interfering; he can again. But I couldn't leave the boy. And then this little feller here—he couldn't rest; he was on horseback the whole afternoon chasing you; but he couldn't catch you, so him and me just harnessed up and come over."

"Did you really ride, Sandy?" said Billy eagerly. "Good for you," and then he turned to his uncle. "Don't be too hard on the old man, please; he's old and so,—so sort of miserable."

The stern eyes smiled back at Billy.

"Old Silas shan't touch you," Uncle Silas said to Polly. Then he turned again to the old man.

"You are guilty of a criminal offense. That you are not in jail before night is only due to your name, and because this boy pleads for you. There was an ugly story some years ago of the way you treated your wife and of the mysterious misfortunes that happened to Polly when she interfered in her sister's behalf. The very first time any more mysterious misfortunes happen to Polly attention will be called to you, and you may not find it pleasant. So you will do well to confine your attention exclusively to yourself. You know me well enough to know that I keep my word. Now hitch a horse into that wagon

and be spry about it. I don't want to see your evil face any longer than is necessary."

The old man, thoroughly cowed, hobbled off. Uncle Silas spoke to Sandy for the first time.

"Is this the little chap?" he said. "Do you belong to Polly?" Sandy shook his head and the tears came into his eyes.

"I don't belong to nobody."

"Who is the little fellow?" Uncle Silas asked of Billy.

"He's a friend of mine. He lived with my schoolmaster. But Mr. Williams doesn't like boys much and Sandy wasn't happy. Father said he'd find another place for him in the fall."

"Let him stay with me," pleaded Polly. Uncle Silas pondered a moment while Pig Polly and little Sandy hung anxiously on his decision.

"All right, Polly," he said presently with his genial smile. "Take the little lad along with you—for the present at any rate—and I'll write to this Mr. Williams and try to arrange matters. No boy could have a better friend than you, Polly, and he'll be a help and comfort to you. As for what you've done for my boys, we none of us can ever thank you."

"But we'll come over very soon and try," said Bob heartily, while Billy beamed assent.

"And you needn't fear old Silas; he won't dare touch you. There's the wagon, boys. Now get your traps together, for what you leave now you'll never see again."

Bob went over and grasped Sandy's hand.

"Sandy," he said, "you're a plucky chap and,—and I never can thank you enough."

"Take him home now, Polly," said Uncle Silas, "and dry him up and rub him down and put him to bed."

The boys took an uproarious leave of Mrs. Polly and Sandy, cheering them as they drove out of the yard. Sandy was driving and his head was high in spite of his tired bones. He had learned to ride a horse, and Bob, the great Bob, had called him brave. He never could be a coward again.

Bob scarcely knew whether he was awake or asleep. He stowed away their belongings in the wagon, while his cheeks glowed and his eyes shone. Not only to escape, but to escape in this triumphant fashion was too much to be borne calmly. But in spite of it, self-important Bob was very quiet, instead of commanding as he would a month before. His afternoon of thought was already bearing fruit.

"I'll send the wagon back to-night," Uncle Silas said to the old man. "Come, boys!"

"Good-bye," said Bob, but he got no answer.

Billy held out his hand, and after a moment's hesitation the old man took it awkwardly; then dropped it and turned back into the house. Billy scrambled up beside Bob on the wagon seat.

"He's a poor lonely old chap," he said pityingly, as they drove out of the yard.

"You've got your mother's heart as well as her smile, haven't you?" asked Uncle Silas who was riding close beside. "But you haven't told me yet how you managed to get into that hole. And why under the sun did you think I was Colonel Smith?"

"You dropped that card the day you gave us the money, and I thought it was yours," said Billy. He had lost a soldier and a Wellington, but he had gained an uncle, and was well content.

"And we got to old Silas's because we got lost so much," said Bob. "First we went wrong at the crossroads and got down in that little village where the blacksmith knew him and didn't know you. If we hadn't got lost again that day, we wouldn't have found old Silas home, for he'd gone across the mountain; and then we'd have asked somewhere else and found out our mistake."

"But we never thought of there being two,"

chimed in Billy. "We just settled down and thought mother's taste wasn't quite so good as usual to be fond of an old man like that. How did there get to be two of you?"

"It is not very pleasant to be classed together so," said Uncle Silas drily. "He was a poor baby left at my father's door: he never knew any parents but mine. He was five years old before my father had any children of his own, and both he and my mother loved the little stray and called it by my father's name: it's hard to spot a villain in his cradle. Then my sister was born,—your grandmother,—and then I came. The other boy wasn't legally adopted, and of course I must have my father's name, and so there got to be 'two of us' as you say. He wasn't ten before he showed out his evil traits—his deceit and greed and ingratitude. Just as long as my mother lived she labored for him, but when she died my father couldn't stand it and turned him out neck and heels before he was twenty. How he got his money no one knows, but he goes without food and clothing, they say, to scrape dollars together. I see him and hear of him so seldom that I had almost forgotten him, and the possibility of your falling into his clutches never occurred to me. I didn't even know

your mother was gone. I don't like to write letters and I didn't hear from you, so I was just waiting for you to turn up when you got ready. Of course, if I'd known certainly you were coming I'd have looked you up. I ought to have done it anyhow."

"No, it was my fault," said Bob, with an effort. "I was the one that wouldn't write."

"Well, never mind that now," said Uncle Silas. "Polly's letter pulled us out of the scrape. She suspected it wasn't all right when she first saw you but she forgot about you till you took her pigs home. She is terribly afraid of old Silas and was almost afraid to write and tell me who she thought you were. And then I didn't read her letter! Well, it's all over now."

The mention of the letter sent Bob's thoughts back to his own which he had not yet read. To feel them in his pocket had been his chief comfort through the long dreary afternoon. Billy aroused him now.

"Is this where you live?" he exclaimed. "Oh, Bobs, just think of it."

For Uncle Silas had turned in at the big gambrel-roofed house, and Miss Myers was on the veranda.

"We've come to supper," laughed Billy, as the lady came forward. Then she ran down the steps in a hurry.

"It is Billy Boynton. Oh, such an afternoon as I've had, Judge. Where have you been? Oh, I'm so thankful. Do tell me all about it."

But she did not wait to hear much about it. She had everything in commotion at once. Bedrooms were opened, baths were prepared and linen set airing. The most delicious sounding orders were sent into the kitchen. Plates whisked themselves over to the dining-table. The boys could see and hear and even smell it from the big, book-lined room where they were left to wait for a minute or two.

Billy in a subdued sort of way went around the book-shelves and read the titles.

"Bobby," he said, turning solemnly to his brother, "I think I've found out something. If you leave your things around and don't mind about having dirty hands, and think studying is a bore—you'll grow up like old Mayhew. I want to be a farmer, but I'd rather be Uncle Silas's kind. Just look at all his books, and I don't believe he could be mean or untidy, but I know he can drive a plough straighter than old Silas. He's what father would call a cultivated Christian gentleman. I'm going to study like blazes all winter."

Bob laughed a little and then grew sober again.

"It isn't all books and things. It's more what you are inside." He paused for a moment and then with a mighty effort he went on:

"A fellow doesn't like to say he isn't worth so much as he thought he was: but I've been too terribly stuck-up because I studied faster than you did, and I've been making a donkey of myself. You're a great deal more of an all round fellow than I am. And all this old Mayhew business has been my fault. It was just because I was pig-headed every time that ——"

Both Bob and Billy were getting so embarrassed over Bob's unusual contrition, that the entrance of the housekeeper was a welcome interruption. She hustled them up-stairs into two big airy rooms. The waiting baths looked so tempting that Billy was convinced on the spot that cleanliness was a luxury as well as a duty.

It was fully eight o'clock when the boys came downstairs in their most holiday attire. They were ravenous with hunger, but Bob, as he snuffed the odors, was ready to wait a few moments still for his supper, if he might find a corner of that cozy library where he could read his mother's letters. And then, all in one minute, these letters which had cost Bob so much woe sank into a place of very secondary importance.

With his foot on the last stair, he heard once more the roll of carriage wheels. There was a quick rustle across the veranda and the sound of steps: and in the open doorway, Bob saw his mother herself. What need of letters now!

Her face was flushed with pleasure and her husband's face behind was no less happy. Billy gave a wild whoop.

"It's mother and father!"

Bob said nothing, but he fell upon his mother as if he could devour her. The sudden surprise and joy were too much for him: all the feelings he had been crowding back for the past hours burst out now in a wild torrent of tears, such as Bob had not shed since his babyhood. He held his mother close, and she drew him off into a side room where she soothed him as only she could. The outburst was over in a couple of minutes, and Bob, feeling disgraced forever, had begun an explanation, when Billy burst into the room to take his turn at strangling his mother. Mr. Boynton followed, and the way in which he grasped his eldest son's hand made Bob hold his head up again. There was a wild clamor of tongues, and then they were called to supper.

In the dining-room, the huge round table—with its

lights and flowers, its glass and silver that made the smoking dishes more than mere food—flashed into Billy's mind a picture of last night's supper in the dim, dirty kitchen with its bare, scantily-spread table. Here were refinement and gentle living to contrast with sordid meanness and squalor: the real Uncle Silas to contrast with the false. Billy's eye involuntarily sought his brother's as Bob pulled out his mother's chair. Then as Uncle Silas bent his head in hearty, simple thanksgiving, and Billy felt that around him were all whom he loved, safe and well, the boy wondered for a moment in alarm if his symptoms were the same as those of the attack to which Bob had succumbed. But he managed to swallow the lump in his throat in time to make way for the beefsteak and fried potatoes.

"Now it's time for your story, father," he said. "Hadn't you almost forgotten what a real beefsteak looked like, Bobs? Why did you come home so soon, father?"

"Because we had scarcely reached Hamburg before I received a cable that told me I was needed at the office. My real work had been done in London, so back we came, rather a disgusted couple. Once at home, of course your mother couldn't wait to see you,

and she got uneasy because no one seemed to know anything about you; so we came right on to give you a surprise."

"But you surprised us quite as much as we you," laughed Mrs. Boynton.

"Yes," said Billy cheerfully, "it's been a surprise party from the very first. I don't quite know yet what's real and what isn't."

"I know some things that are real," said mamma with a contented little smile. Her quick eyes, even in these few minutes, had noticed Billy's shining hands and nails, and discovered the new depth and self-control in Bob's face—so different to his old self-satisfaction. She had heard how little Bob spoke of himself, and she had heard Billy's disgust at uncleanliness and uncultivation. So she was content.

Billy's stories made his father roar with laughter and Uncle Silas snort with indignation.

"It certainly isn't the sort of schooling I should have chosen for you," Mr. Boynton said. "But I can't regret it now that it is over. Hard knocks don't hurt a strong man, and I must say I am proud that my two boys had the pluck to stand a life of that sort and come out none the worse. Do you still want to be a farmer, Billy?"

"Yes, father," said Billy.

"Will you stay with me and learn how?" asked Uncle Silas.

Billy blushed and laughed. "I'd like it—if you'll take me by and by. I guess I'd better go back to school and study more first. I don't want to be that kind of a farmer."

"Do you suppose you can get on with Mr. Williams now if he will take you back?" asked Mr. Boynton.

"Yes, sir, I think so," Billy said, with a frank look in his blue eyes. "Any fellow can get on with Mr. Williams if he wants to. And I'm going to study this winter."

"And when he sees your reform he'll think it was the thrashing that did it, and will tell you he could have made a good boy of you long ago, if you had not had such a lax, good-for-nothing father."

"He won't say anything like that to me," said Billy, with quiet determination. "There's nobody I'd change fathers with."

"How is it about mothers, Bob?" asked Uncle Silas, who had been watching the boy.

Bob looked at his mother and smiled. But he did not answer a word.